

**A PASTORAL APPROACH FOR THE JOURNEY OF HEALING AND WHOLENESS
THROUGH SHARING ONE'S LATVIAN GRIEF STORY**

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Presented to
the Faculty of the
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**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry**

**by
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ABSTRACT

A Pastoral Approach for the Journey of Healing and Wholeness

Through Sharing One's Latvian Grief Story

by

Ruth Sonia Ziedonis

Through the process of sharing one's grief and loss story, healing and wholeness occur. The writer submits that to understand the depth of suffering and hope within the grief stories of Latvian immigrant parishioners, one must explore the history of the Latvian people as well. The project reflects upon the grief stories of the writer's Latvian immigrant parishioners; elaborates on some of the history of Latvia, paying special attention to the trauma of war and the process of healing from post-traumatic stress disorder; and analyzes difficulties within present independent Latvia. The project also focuses on the significance of theology and storytelling within the community.

As a pastor of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the writer has made many pastoral visits to the elderly in their homes, nursing homes, and hospitals, and has recognized that many parishioners struggle with heavy issues of grief and loss. In life-changing events, grief is a natural, highly personal process that can lead to emotional and spiritual healing and personal growth. The purpose of this project was to analyze the grief stories of parishioners in relation to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief. Providing a safe and stable environment for the parishioners to share their grief stories helped many of them to move through the five Kübler-Ross stages--denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance--in dealing with their grief. Others became locked in anger or depression, or even died in the midst of anger or depression. Even fifty years since the war and their immigration, some elderly parishioners are afraid to

venture outside their immediate Latvian community to accept the hand of their next-door neighbor or people of other cultures. Through the pastoral approach of giving compassion and encouragement, parishioners have experienced healing.

This project concludes with a theological analysis of the acts of storytelling, confession, and forgiveness. Through God's grace, the parishioners have responded in faith within their Latvian community, by forgiving themselves and others, and experiencing healing and wholeness through telling their grief stories.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Latvian Grief Story

As a pastor of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bucks County and Vicinity, I have made many pastoral care and counseling visitations with the elderly in their homes, nursing homes, and hospitals. Through these visits I have recognized that many parishioners were struggling with heavy issues of grief and loss. Their grief and loss issues were tied to their experiences during World War I and World War II: the pain of their exodus journey from Latvia to the United States, and grief from the deaths of several family members due to the wars. Grief is a natural process which is highly personal; it is a normal response to life-changing events that can lead to emotional and spiritual healing and personal growth. During my visitations with parishioners over a period of four years, I have realized that through the process of sharing their grief stories, some healing and wholeness were emerging.

Some parishioners moved out of denial into greater understanding and awareness of their grief and loss. Providing a safe and stable environment for my parishioners to share their grief stories helped others to move from a cognitive realization of their grief into an awareness of their feelings. Many parishioners could move from feelings of denial to anger to bargaining to depression and to acceptance of their grief issues. Other parishioners were not able to move so swiftly through the various Kübler-Ross stages of grief and often became locked in the stages of anger or depression. Some of these parishioners still remain in these stages, and others have died in the midst of anger or

depression. Unfortunately, unacknowledged losses and unexpressed grief can continue to cause pain in a parishioner's life, which could lead eventually to ill health, disease, and loss of purpose and meaning in life. However, I realized that through the pastoral care and counseling approach of listening to the grief stories and working with parishioners through their grief issues, most parishioners experienced some form of healing and wholeness.

Since I am a pastor of the Latvian Lutheran Church and a daughter of Latvian immigrant parents, I see a need to share the information of my project with other Latvian Lutheran pastors, people of Latvian communities, and others who are interested in the healing and wholeness process of grief recovery. Very little work has been done with the immigrant Latvian community in the field of pastoral care and counseling. This project can shed some light on the dark area of grief and loss work with the Latvian immigrant population of America and other parts of the world. My hope is that more people can experience healing and wholeness through telling their particular grief and loss stories.

After four years of parish ministry in the Latvian Lutheran Church, I noted that many of my parishioners were experiencing changes in their lives and experiencing freedom from the burden of pain and grief. I made the connection at this time that my parishioners were experiencing healing and wholeness through the process of sharing their grief stories. The process of telling one's story in a safe and nonjudgmental context provided an environment for healing. I found that when parishioners shared and expressed their feelings in the telling of their stories, they gained insights into their past experiences. These insights were valuable for their present life. As they became more comfortable with

sharing their stories with me, I observed that they were also beginning to reach out to others within the parish to share their stories about the war.

My hope is also that people in other cultures with similar issues can identify with the process of healing and apply the principles of story-sharing with the parishioners of their churches and their ethnic communities. Sharing one's grief story of war and immigration experiences may be applicable in a general way to other cultures as well. Sharing grief stories is certainly important for parishioners of the Latvian churches because, as a culture, many have kept quiet for fear of further persecution or shame, or simply out of cultural respect for not wanting to burden others with their painful stories.

Parishioners have told me of their difficulties to begin sharing their stories of grief and loss. Yet, after they began sharing their stories, they became more comfortable with sharing. For the pastor (or other professional or layperson in the church), hearing the sharing of grief stories is often painful. However, we can learn to listen and be present in helpful ways for those sharing their stories. As the parishioners shared their stories, their stories soon became a part of my story as I listened and worked with them through the grief stages. Through the experiences of loss and grief in my own life and through the sharing of many other people's stories, I have learned that losses need to be grieved. It is never too late in life to begin or continue working on the grieving process.

Sharing one's grief story within the Latvian faith community is important for living fully in the present. Many of my elderly parishioners still live in the past and not in the present, because they suffer from the trauma of their past grief experiences. Even after fifty years, they live with fear and in isolation in one way or another. Issues of unresolved

grief often appear in their daily lives. Many of our parishioners are afraid to venture outside their immediate Latvian community. Their fear prevents them from reaching out or accepting the hand of their next-door neighbors or of people of other cultures. Unfortunately, they also refrain from inviting their non-Latvian friends or neighbors to their ethnic Latvian church.

Since many of them, for years, have lived with unresolved anger or depression, some have turned to alcohol for comfort. In the Slavic and Baltic cultures, alcoholism runs in families and in the culture as a way to forget one's troubles or to enjoy life, to act virile. Other parishioners who experienced deprivation and hunger in the last decades have developed food-related problems--hoarding food or overeating addictions. Also, issues of abandonment, fear, suspicion, and insecurity are reflected in their daily lives due to their traumatic war experiences. Some are suspicious even of their Latvian friends due to years of persecution under their war experiences. Within the project, I would like to address some of these issues and give possible therapeutic solutions, which have helped my parishioners gain a greater understanding of their traumatic war and immigration experiences. A greater understanding, in turn, has led them from suffering and grief toward healing and wholeness in life.

Through the pastoral care and counseling approach of giving warmth, compassion, and encouragement, my parishioners over the past several years are experiencing a change in emotion, intellect, and spirit.

Narrative Theology

Is there something in stories that of their very nature express the way and mind of God more than any other expression? Is it because story is an intractable 'knowledge-energy' that links one person to another, one generation to another and ultimately all to God? Is story in fact—spoken, written, enacted, painted, sculpted, drawn, sung—an echo of our origin, a tradition—bond to our beginnings, a resonance of something pristine? Jewish tradition openly says yes.¹

Narrative theology reflects how stories of people give meaning and expression to their past, present, and potentially future situations in life. Mary Elizabeth Moore gives a thorough description of narrative theology and the narrative method (and relational teaching) in her book, *Teaching From the Heart: Theology and Educational Method*. Moore weaves narrative theology into process theology in a dynamic and moving fashion. She also reflects on the narrative method as applicable to modern education, religious and moral education, and assumptions about learning. Moore creatively reflects on narrative method as re-formed by process theology, and process theology as re-formed by the narrative method. Moore reflects her own teaching experience as having been valuable to making new discoveries about narrative theology. Her reflections on her teaching experience actually explain clearly the essence of narrative theology. Moore states,

I discovered how one story generates another; how sharing stories binds people together, even across ideological divides; how stories ground

¹William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), 15.

people in their heritage and give expression to their present situation; how stories enliven social critique; and how stories give hope for the future.²

Moore also reflects from her experience and knowledge of process theology how narrative teaching gives meaning to abstract concepts and specific skills, presenting them within contexts in which interest is stirred and people can view the parts in relation to the whole.³

Moore reflects that a sense of wonder is revealed in narratives, and the sense of being related to the world gives inspiration and spirit. Moore states, "I hope our stories will be read and told and danced and painted and sung until we know ourselves in relation to all that has been and all that is to come."⁴ According to Moore, narrative theology and the narrative method are a significant mode of communication, a bearer and critic of culture, and a potentially profound and far-reaching educational method. Narrative theology has the power to form and transform its listeners. Moore concludes her chapter on the narrative method in reflecting that

because stories can, and have, formed us, they require critique. Because they have the power to transform us, we need to choose stories that are creative, redemptive, and liberative. . . . Many stories could be gathered, and many stories reflected on with the best of our critical and imaginative tools. In doing so, the power of story to form and transform persons would be unleashed and respected. The power of stories would be set loose to tell truth!⁵

²Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 131.

³Moore, *Teaching from the Heart*, 131.

⁴Moore, *Teaching from the Heart*, 132.

⁵Moore, *Teaching from the Heart*, 162.

A Pastoral Approach to the Journey of Healing

Out of my parish home, nursing home, and hospital visitations with my Latvian immigrant parishioners come many moving stories of grief and loss during World War I and World War II. Suffering and hardship also come from the holocaust experiences of Siberia. Also faith and hope stories abound from their immigrant travels and experiences in life. As part of my Doctor of Ministry project, I am integrating these dynamic stories of my parishioners with reflections on the pastoral counseling and theological dimensions of ministry with people in grief. In this way, I propose the central concept--that healing and wholeness occur through the process of the telling of one's story.

Andrejs' grief story is an exemplar of the stories that will be told throughout the project--stories that weave personal history with national and international history, stories that bear pain and hope, stories that can be evoked, shared, and interpreted.

Andrejs' Grief Story

Andrejs is one of several parishioners whose grief story is moving to hear.⁶ He has walked through much pain, but has again found joy in life through the process of telling his grief story. Andrejs' story is an echo of the past that links one person to another, one generation to another and--as Bausch so profoundly reflects--connects all to God!⁷

As I was visiting one evening with the family of Andrejs after his first stroke, I sensed that he was struggling with his past. I asked him to tell me about his life experiences. He began his story by saying that he had graduated from the University of

⁶All names have been changed.

⁷Bausch, 15.

Latvia and had married during the period when the Germans invaded Latvia and forced the Soviet Army out of the country. Then the Nazis drafted him into the German Army and sent him to the Eastern front along with many other young Latvian draftees. By then his wife was expecting their first child. Andrejs was upset to leave her alone at such a time. He also had barely started work in architecture, which he had chosen as his specialty. He told me that he was wounded in battle and then was transferred to a military hospital in Germany. He experienced feelings of fear, anger, hurt, and powerlessness about his situation. Meanwhile, the Russian front advanced and occupied the Baltic area, Poland and East Germany, and from the West the Allies closed in on Germany.

Just before the Americans captured the area, Andrejs was released from the hospital. The Americans captured and arrested him, and sent him to a POW camp in Belgium. The war finally ended with the capitulation of Germany in May 1945, but the Iron Curtain prevented any communications with the people in Latvia for at least another year. This was a very frustrating time for Andrejs, who desperately longed to find out about his family. Yet he was afraid to do so, fearing that the Russians would hurt them if they made contacts with the Western world.

In 1946 Andrejs was released from the POW camp. He made his way to a Latvian refugee camp, called a DP (displaced persons) camp in the American sector, where he found some of his Latvian friends. Because World War II had ended with a peace agreement, all the refugees hoped that soon the Soviet Army would withdraw from their country. Then they would be free to return. They could not risk going back until then because they might be sent to Siberia. However, as time passed, they realized that nothing

of the sort would happen. The Western powers only had praise for their Eastern ally who had helped them win the war. Afraid and exhausted, the refugees did not want to create waves. Andrejs shared with me how frightened he and other previous soldiers were that the Allies would deny them access to the DP camps. The Allies did not understand their helpless situation. In bombed-out Germany there was no place to live or work. Thus, the refugees tried to use this waiting period constructively.

Encouraged by the United States administration, the Latvians started to clear the rubble from the half-bombed buildings. They opened an elementary school and a high school, and worked on a chapel. Here Andrejs could put his talent to work. He fashioned the chapel into an icon of faith. He told me that he trusted in God's help. Through the medium of mortar and stone, he displayed the images Christ's work on earth, his suffering, redeeming death, and glorious resurrection. He also at this time had thought of his wife and little child in Latvia and wondered how they were managing without him. Occasionally, some news did trickle down to him, and that news usually was not good.

One day, one of Andrejs' friends received a letter from home; unfortunately, it contained also bad news about Andrejs' family: his wife and son had been killed in the war and were laid to rest in the family burial plot! As Andrejs recalled the event in the DP camp, he broke down and cried, and I cried with him. He shared with me in a timid way his sorrow and heartbreak.

Andrejs told me how grateful he had been that the pastor of the camp church helped him deal with his anger and grief over the deaths of his wife and son. I asked Andrejs to tell me his story about the relationship between himself and his first wife Diāna.

He shared with me his feelings of his first love, and expressed his grief and despair over his wife and his son Jānis, whom he never even met. His dreams for their life together as a family after the war were shattered, and he was left feeling empty and depressed. He shared how he slowly recuperated from his loss and put his whole energy into finishing the church. Then he repaired or replaced parts of churches elsewhere. So many churches were damaged all over Germany! Some even had to be rebuilt from the ground up. This creative work healed his broken soul gradually.

The Latvian people in the camp always looked forward to seeing old and new plays by Latvian authors. At one such event, some friends introduced Andrejs to Ilze. She was very kind and understanding. They fell in love and eventually were married in the same camp church where Andrejs created his first church windows. Andrejs shared with me how happy he was to have met Ilze. She has brought joy and meaning to his life.

In the early fifties most of the Latvian refugees tried to immigrate to America, either to the USA or to Canada. Andrejs and Ilze settled in Pennsylvania, where they had three children. Business was good, and he became well known as a talented architect.

Before I left on the evening Andrejs shared his story, he told me that, God willing, he would like to visit Latvia for the first time since the war, now that his native land has regained its independence in 1991. While there, he also wanted to visit the graves of his first wife and son. His family later joined us in prayer for them and all other relatives in Latvia.

About a year after his first stroke and the sharing of his story, Andrejs was back on his feet and felt strong enough to go back to his homeland for a visit. He later told me

that, when he returned, he fell into a deep depression. Unfortunately, he was also drinking more heavily than he did in the past. He had another stroke and was rushed to the hospital. While he was in the emergency room waiting for treatment, he fell off the table and broke his hip, which complicated the situation even more. After my several visits to the hospital and the rehabilitation center, Andrejs shared about his visit to Latvia, which had stirred up feelings from his past war experience. With further pastoral visits and sharing of his story, Andrejs slowly regained his emotional and spiritual power and strength to go on living.

He had gone to Latvia in the hope of seeing some of his relatives and the homestead where he was born and had spent his youth more than fifty years ago. Even the road leading to it was hard to find, and strangers did not really know how to give directions to his old farm. Everything had changed. He barely recognized the old landmarks. Many farms were run down. Others had disappeared altogether over time. He finally found the old homestead. It was overgrown with weeds and bushes. Everything looked so neglected. He approached the house and looked in through a window: an old woman was sitting near the window and crocheting. It was one of his younger cousins, who was at first shocked, but then overjoyed, to see him. She told Andrejs that all the others had died--parents, uncles and aunts, cousins whom he used to know. In a bittersweet reunion they shared their grief of loneliness and despair together.

Reflecting on Andrejs' Story

Andrejs handled his own grief through sharing his feelings from his past war experiences of fear, anger, hurt, and helplessness with his close friends. I believe that this was very helpful for Andrejs in his process of healing emotionally and spiritually from his

war experience. A typical response to grief for many people, unfortunately, is not to talk about it, not to feel it, and not to trust anyone with their personal grief story. Fortunately for Andrejs, he shared his story with his close friends, as they shared their stories with him. Part of the process of healing is to recognize and express one's feelings around one's losses. It was also good that he could share with me this sad war story as he relived those times of the past. There is healing and wholeness of the soul through sharing one's grief story, though the death of his loved ones occurred many years ago.

I believe it was a painful and yet a healing visit for Andrejs to visit his homeland Latvia. I believe that he became aware not only of the physical changes in his native land, but, more significantly, of how much his native land was a part of his past. Although it was painful for Andrejs to witness how much neglect and devastation had occurred in his native land during the Soviet occupation, he was also beginning to heal from the separation from his homeland through the realization that he had the freedom to go back whenever he wanted to do so. Andrejs also experienced some touching moments that could only be recaptured through the eyes of one who had lost and then regained the sweet memory of the past. How dear to him was every floating cloud in the blue sky, every tree on the rolling hills! How dear were the fields, flowers, even the humble blades of grass under his feet! With the creative eye of an artist he drank it all in with a thirst that needed to be quenched for so many years. Unfortunately, many of our elderly parishioners have not made that healing journey, because they are afraid to shatter the dreams and experiences of their childhood or adolescent dreams of their past. Those memories linger in their minds and hearts as in a "never-never-land," where nothing ever changes; at the

same time, they read the Latvian newspapers and watch television, and they know that Latvia has undergone much suffering in the last few years. These conflicting contrasts clash in their minds and hearts; they continue to create much unresolved pain. Andrejs proceeded to tell me more of his story about the visit to Latvia.

On the farmstead, he found a tree he had planted in his youth. It was spreading its huge branches as if it were inviting him to come home. Nevertheless, Andrejs realized that he was too old to rebuild his birthplace. In the family cemetery, he found the graves of his first wife, Diāna, a reminder of his young love. Next to it was the grave of his first son, Jānis, whom he had never seen. Andrejs told me that with a broken heart he bid them farewell till they would meet again in the next world. All around him were strangers, many of them Russians, who had settled here on orders of the occupying Soviet government. They had taken over some farmsteads and were not ready to leave, though they felt no loyalty toward Latvia or its people. Andrejs also realized that many younger generation Latvians, too, had changed their ways under the heavy yoke of occupation and forced Russification: they displayed suspicions and fears, stealth, and slyness. Where were the virtues of hard work, honesty, charity and spirituality that once were at the core of his people's way of life? He felt like a stranger in his own land. With a heavy heart, he shut his memories deep within himself and turned westward to his present wife and three children in America.

Andrejs told me that his wife Ilze and their children were his family, waiting for his return, and America was his new homeland, where he belonged. Andrejs had tears in his eyes as he recounted the strong emotions connected with his visit to Latvia. Andrejs

pointed out to me that this visit had been very hard on him, because it had opened old wounds and created new ones. He suffered from the devastation of his beloved native land and felt the powerlessness that he could do nothing to change the situation. He also realized that life had passed by so quickly, that he and his wife were getting old. His strokes weakened him, and his wife suffered from debilitating arthritis throughout her body. Because of his visit to Latvia, Andrejs had fallen into a deep depression. For days, even weeks, he could not even get out of bed. By retelling his story, through prayers, the excellent help from his doctors, and visits from me and friends, Andrejs gradually improved physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Andrejs had two more strokes and suffered more emotional and physical pain. In spite of the suffering and disappointments that he had endured during his illness and recuperation, he had time for reflection and contemplation on his life. His faith became strengthened as he prayed and felt God's love through his friends, family, and pastor who visited him and were open to hearing him share his story.

William Bausch profoundly reflects that stories not only bridge us to our roots and our common humanity, but they help us to remember: "Remember what? Our past, our history, our glories, and our shame. People today still tell stories of the Jewish holocaust, of Vietnam, of Nagasaki, precisely so that we don't forget what we have done, can do, to each other."⁸ This insight of Bausch is embodied in Andrejs' story.

Through the telling of his story, we can learn that Andrejs' relationship with the loss of his homeland and grief in the death of his first wife and son has not ended, but

⁸Bausch, 36.

changed. As Andrejs continues to share his story with others, his story will change perspective, and he will experience his story in a new way. As he tells his story differently, others in turn will hear his story differently and will hopefully experience healing and wholeness in their lives. Essentially, through the process of sharing his story, Andrejs has become more able to let go of his pain, his hurt, and his lack of forgiveness. Now Andrejs is more able to change and grow and live life more fully.

One of Andrejs' daughters and her family moved back into the family home to care for her aging parents. With the benefit of a close-knit family, Andrejs has made a shift in life style. Now he can watch his grandchildren as they grow up around him. He needs a walker to move a few steps at a time, but dinner is always on the table, and a loving grandchild attends to his needs.

We can see in Andrejs' present story the realization of new lifestyles, as described in Allen J. Moore's article, "The Family Relations of Older Persons." Moore explains that new forms of familial expression are common today.

What might be concluded is that there is great variation in how people organize their familial lines today. Some may choose to remain in a close relationship with adult children and grandchildren, while others are choosing the freedom of retirement to explore new life styles and new forms of familial expression.⁹

Andrejs shared with me that he was happy with this new arrangement of having some of his family members move back into his home. He told me that he felt valued and appreciated by his daughter and her family.

⁹Allen J. Moore, "The Family Relations of Older Persons," in *Ministry with the Aging: Designs, Challenges, Foundations*, ed. William M. Clements (New York: Haworth Press, 1989), 179.

Andrejs has accepted the fact that he is getting older, that he is not in good health anymore, and that life is different now in his homeland Latvia. Andrejs shared with me that his faith has become stronger than ever. He told me that God has been good to him, and that there is nothing that can separate him from the love of God. Andrejs is trying to relax and enjoy life now. After I gave home communion to Andrejs and his wife, I was glad that he had shared his grief story about his visit to Latvia with me and others, and that he was experiencing more healing and wholeness in his life. Andrejs has experienced empowerment and peace of mind by working through his past and present experiences.

Gathering History and Stories

In order really to understand the depth of suffering and hope within the grief stories of my Latvian American parishioners, it is very important to see the history of the Latvian people's struggle, suffering, and grief since the time of their settlement at the Baltic Sea. Therefore, the second chapter of my project will be a brief overview and some important details of Latvian history, along with the grief and loss stories of my Latvian immigrant parishioners.

Latvian folklore is both joyous and sad. It reflects the good times of early Latvian history of successful self-rule, prosperity, and high moral standards based on love and respect for the pagan gods and goddesses, and for all living things. This folklore also reflects the times of upheaval and war, which were marked by centuries of destruction and oppression by foreign powers. Orphan songs lament the loss of parents and abuse by harsh masters. War songs tell of the bravery and patriotism of Latvian soldiers. These folk

songs, *dainas*, are a living record of Latvian history and culture. Folklore and literature of more recent times show the resiliency of the Latvian people through suffering and hope.

Whether in folklore or personal autobiography, the Latvian people have historically described their lives and expressed their feelings through storytelling; thus, the historical account of the next chapters is interspersed with stories.

CHAPTER 2

The Early History of Latvia with Suffering and Hope

I'm certain that man will never give up true suffering, that is, chaos and destruction. Why, suffering is the only cause of consciousness. And, although I declared at the beginning that consciousness is man's greatest plague, I know that he likes it and won't exchange it for any advantage. Consciousness, for instance, is of a much higher order than twice two. After twice two, we'll, of course, have nothing left either to do or to find out.

Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*.¹

Latvians and people of many other cultures have suffered greatly because of war, human cruelty, human error, and tragic events beyond their control. Through their exile from Latvia during World War I and World War II, the Latvian people have experienced extreme pain and suffering, and many losses. The Latvians truly have become an "exiled" people because of persecutions and wars. The word "exile" is used appropriately here to define the Latvian experience as a prolonged separation from one's native land by force of circumstances. The Latvian term *trimda* is an exile with no hope of return. While still on the continent of Europe, the refugees hoped to return to a free Latvia after the end of the war; however, when the Soviet occupation persisted and the Cold War period extended to the unforeseeable future, and lack of work and housing forced the refugees to look for a more stable life situation on other continents, hopes for returning to Latvia grew dimmer with each succeeding year.

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Notes from Underground," in *Dostoevsky: Notes from Underground*, trans. and afterword by Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Penguin Books/Signet Classic, 1961), 118.

Only after the hoped for, but seemingly unattainable, events in the Soviet Union on August 19, 1991, was Latvia able to declare its independence as a democratic republic on August 21, 1991. However, many struggles still lie ahead because the Latvians now comprise only 51 per cent of the total population of Latvia.

The middle-aged and younger Latvian Americans have fully integrated into the American culture and way of life. They also actively participate in scientific and cultural endeavors to stabilize their native country. On the other hand, most elderly Latvian immigrants in their eighties and nineties still have not totally adjusted to the American culture and language. They would like to return to their country of birth, but they cannot because they now have their roots here in America. They have become too old to rebuild their lifestyle in Latvia; many are too ill to settle in Latvia where medicine is lacking and medical procedures are outdated. Thus, most elderly Latvian immigrants have reconciled themselves with the status of exile, or life "abroad." They have bonded together and have shared their stories and their loneliness by looking after each other within their Latvian communities in America and on other continents.

Fifty years of Communism, with its intense Russification efforts and deliberate atheism, have changed the culture and ruined the ethics of many people who have remained on their native Latvian soil. In Latvia, many adults, and especially the younger generation of today, no longer esteem the aesthetic, ethical and religious way of life that their ancestors practiced and honored for centuries. Through forced overindustrialization, the land, its clear waters, and the Baltic Sea have become polluted. Buildings in towns and the countryside have been grossly neglected; the fields in some regions have become

overgrown with bushes and weeds. Many members of my congregation had been farmers. Their farms have been neglected by strangers from various regions of the Soviet Union, or they were destroyed during the war. Under the Soviet system, their land was nationalized and they were forced into regional kolkhozes. Paradoxically, both suffering and hope seem to be a part of Latvian history since their earliest existence at this strategic and desirable location on the shores of the Baltic Sea.

Brief History of Latvia

Latvia is a small country on the Baltic Sea, about the size of the State of Maryland. Because of the benevolent influence of the Gulf Stream, the winters are usually mild with a good amount of precipitation from the sea. The summers are pleasant with a constant breeze from the western and northern seashores. The land contains only traces of various minerals, but the dark soil, especially in central Latvia, is fertile from glacial deposits, and therefore Latvia's exports until World War II were mainly agricultural. Fishing has been the second prevalent occupation since ancient times. Latvia is fortunate to have several excellent harbors that remain open for most of the winter.

Because of its politically strategic location, Latvia has been an object of intense desire for all neighboring powers for centuries. Thus, Latvia's history is of a peculiar nature. The Vikings needed the Daugava River (called *austurvaegr*) for a trade route from the Baltic Sea to the Black and Mediterranean seas. The Phoenicians sailed all around the west coast of Europe and past England to the Baltic Sea's southeastern coast of "Amberland" to buy precious amber for the kingdoms of Greece and the Near East. They believed amber to be a "mysterious substance," and used it for worship and funeral pyres.

The Greek philosopher Thallus noted the peculiarity of Baltic amber in its acquiring electric properties by friction; therefore, he called it “electron.”² Homer mentions amber in the *Odyssey*. Thus the Baltic nations prospered and expanded their sphere of influence in the fifth century A.D., even up to the region of present-day Moscow.

Early Origins

Historically the Latvian religious traditions come from the ancient Kurgan people who originated from the Eurasian steppes. They possessed vehicles, a specialized knowledge of animal husbandry, and of farming on a small scale. They were acquainted with metallurgy, having acquired their knowledge at the end of the third millennium B.C. from the Near Eastern peoples. Their society was divided into warrior and laboring classes, based on small patriarchal communities. It contrasted with the European Neolithic agricultural people who lived in large communities and apparently had a social structure based on a matriarchal system.³ One branch of the Kurgan people migrated south into India and developed the Sanskrit religion and culture, while the other branch migrated west and north into the southeastern coastal areas on the Baltic Sea known as present-day Prussia, Lithuania, and Latvia. There this latter branch developed the Baltic religion and culture while keeping alive the two oldest of the Indo-European languages--Lithuanian, which is the most archaic and remains closest to Sanskrit, and Latvian, which has become

² Alfred Bilmanis, *Dictionary of Events in Latvia* (Washington, D.C.: [Latvian Legation], 1946), 4.

³ Marija Gimbutas, *The Balts* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), 38-39.

more modernized.⁴ The Kursi of Prussia, known in German as the Kurisches Haff region, were totally Germanized and became extinct as a linguistic branch only by the middle of the eighteenth century.

The Golden Age

By the fifth century C.E., the golden age of the Baltic sphere of influence, the early Balts occupied a large area, which stretched from Pomerania in the west to Central Russia in the east. As Marija Gimbutas points out, "North and east of this large territory lived the Finno-Ugrian tribes, who must have had close relations with the Balts, as is evidenced from the hundreds of loan words from the Baltic into the Finno-Ugrian languages."⁵ The ancient Livs, a Finno-Ugrian tribe of fishers and hunters, lived in the northern and northwestern parts of Latvia and Estonia when the Baltic tribes moved into the region; therefore, the early chroniclers called the entire region of Estonia and Latvia Livonia or Livland.⁶

⁴ Gimbutas, *The Balts*, 43, cites the following examples as proof of the relatedness of Baltic, Greek and Indo-Iranian languages. The Lithuanian *pilis*, Lettish (Latvian) *pils*, or Old Prussian *pil* correspond with the Greek *polis*, Old Indic *pur*, *puris*, and Sanskrit *puh*, meaning acropolis, castle, town. Another example is the word for house group: Lithuanian *kaimas*, Old Prussian *caymis*, Gothic *haims*, and Greek *huin*. Also, the village had its chief: Lithuanian *vespatis*, Sanskrit *vic 'patih*, Avestan *vis 'patis*.

⁵ Marija Gimbutas, "Balts," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1965 ed.

⁶ The most famous of them is *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae*, published by Bibliotheca Baltica, trans. from the original Latin into Latvian (side by side) as *Heinrici Chronicon/Indriķa hronika*, by A. Feldhūns, with introduction and commentaries by E. Murgurēvičs (Riga: Zinātne, 1993); into English as *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, ed. J. P. Heironimus, trans. with introduction and notes by James A. Brundage (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961); into German as *Heinrich von Lettland, Livlaendische Chronik*, trans. Albert Bauer (Würzburg: Holzner Verlag, 1959).

The ancient Baltic traditions were rooted in a nature religion. The Latvian poet Jānis Rainis (1865-1929) counts the Latvian folk songs as part of his earliest literary experiences, and he not only memorized many of these beautiful songs as he heard them from his mother and the farm workers, but he also managed to recreate the spirit of this culture in his poetry and plays later in life. In one of his letters he wrote:

Latvian mythology is most evident even now in our folk songs, and there it is--clearly a nature cult, expressed in such a lovely, humane, and ordinary way, as can be found in no other place on earth. These folk song deities have absolutely no religious, or in any way fanciful, adjuncts, as can be found even in [the mythology of] the ancient Greeks, who appreciated beauty and simplicity, not to mention the Germans, Babylonians, and Egyptians.⁷

During the thirteenth century the Latvian mythology and folklore gradually became mixed with the Roman Catholic Christian tradition, and eventually with the Lutheran Protestant tradition in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries via Sweden. Also Eastern Orthodoxy, introduced to Russia in the eleventh century, eventually infiltrated some eastern parts of the Baltic region. However, even to this day, Latvians in the countryside celebrate most of their cultural holidays at the changing of the seasons. The most notable are the summer and winter solstices on June 21 and December 21. Especially the summer solstice festival, *Jāņi*, honoring the fertility deity Jānis, is observed regularly as a national holiday.

Jāņi (St. John's Day) is a joyous festival with many ancient rituals. It is observed in the countryside. The summer solstice festival is a joyous feast, with homemade beer. Men

⁷ Jānis Rainis [Jānis Pliekšāns], "Vēstules" [Letters], in *Kalnā kāpējs* [Mountain climber], ed. K. Dzīlleja, vol. 16 of *J. Rainis: Raksti* [J. Rainis: Works] (Västerås, Sweden: "Ziemeļblāzma"/Jānis Abučs, 1965), 151.

wear crowns of oak leaves and women and girls wear crowns of field flowers. Men and women take turns teasing each other with appropriate *Jāņi* folk songs. Everyone is dancing. Young lovers go into the woods, seeking the elusive fern blossom, which supposedly blooms only this one magic night of the year. When the bonfire dies down, couples jump over the embers for good luck. Also, since this is the shortest night of the year, everyone stays awake until dawn while singing and merrymaking.

The joyous *Jāņi* festival is also observed in a nature setting by Latvian communities all around the world. Amid the suffering in their lives, it is a pleasure to experience the joy of the Latvian people on *Jāņi*.

Even to this day ancient traditions and folklore have been preserved through folk songs, *dainas*, which contain a great wealth of knowledge about the ancient culture and mythology of the Balts, who had songs for all occasions. As Marija Gimbutas points out, these songs were used ceaselessly during all of life for work and on special occasions:

In the fields, around fires, as well as by the mother's spindle wheel and loom during long winter evenings, folk songs and tales flourished and were transmitted from generation to generation. Collective field labors were followed by song, sung in rotation by several voices, and with refrains which harmonized with the rhythm of harvesting, and flax and hemp plucking and drying. From lullabies and wedding songs to songs of lamentation during wakes, man's life was inseparable from the *dainas*, . . . as though singing was as necessary and as easy as breathing. And their songs for all occasions reflect these people's feeling of kinship with mother earth and her many creatures, and appreciation of her manifold gifts.⁸

Haralds Biezais, a specialist in Baltic folklore and mythology, states that by 1954 a total of 400,000 original Latvian folk songs and variants had been published, and the

⁸ Gimbutas, *The Balts*, 35.

archives of Latvia contained yet over 800,000 unpublished folk song variants. He draws conclusions about the richness of Latvian culture from this evidence:

No other country can show such a treasure of folk songs. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the [Latvian] people which have composed these songs and have preserved them up to our time number barely two million. That confirms again that the time of development could not have been brief, but must have spanned several centuries.⁹

Into this prosperous farming and trading region came German pioneers and priests to convert the Balts to Christianity, as well as

merchants from Bremen, Lübeck and Wisby in Gothland, forerunners of the great traders of the Hanseatic League who established trading centers along the coast. In 1199 the pagan chieftains in Livonia rose in arms against the Christians, who refused to pay tribute to them. In consequence the Pope decreed a Holy War against the pagans in the Baltic.¹⁰

The Pope granted all the rights and privileges of crusaders to the German knights who took up arms and defended Christians in pagan lands. Thus, in 1200 Bishop Albert of Bremen sailed up the Daugava river with 23 ships and a large concourse of German adventurers on their blessed mission to "the last pagan outpost," in order to convert the Latvians (also called Letts) and Finno-Ugrian Estonians to Roman Catholicism. In 1201 Bishop Albert founded Riga, which became the capital of Livonia. The Latvian tribes at that time were well organized politically, but they had not yet merged into one nation. The crusaders took advantage of this situation by treacherously dividing and conquering the various tribes before they could unite. When the people realized that they had been

⁹ Haralds Biezais, *Die Religionsquellen der baltischen Völker und die Ergebnisse der bisherigen Forschungen* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1954), 93.

¹⁰ Herbert A. Grant Watson, *The Latvian Republic: The Struggle for Freedom* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), 27.

betrayed, many of them “washed off” their baptism in their sacred river, Daugava. The crusaders viewed them as renegades and killed them. Thus, much suffering came to the land. The crusaders also conquered the western Latvian region of Kurzeme (Courland), and the southeastern region of Latgale. Because of their atrocities, the Pope suppressed the Livonian Order in 1236.¹¹ The Latvians valiantly resisted them for 100 years, until 1290. Then many Zemgallians of central Latvia fled south and joined the Lithuanians. Although the original purpose of the Livonian crusaders had been accomplished, they did not return to Germany, but stayed on in this region as protectors of Livonia. In reality they became feudal overlords of the Latvians and Estonians.

Thus, since the beginning of the thirteenth century, started the 700 years of subjugation of these free peoples in the name of God, and Latvian history is filled with uninterrupted oppression by various European powers. These centuries have become known as the seven hundred years of oppression and suffering.

Seven Hundred Years of Oppression

Riga, as a member of the Hanseatic League, developed an active east-west trade between Russia and western Europe. The city prospered, and so did Bishop Albert and the knights. The welfare of the native people was ignored, despite the advice of the Pope and the Emperor.

Papal legates, on instruction from the Pope, informed Bishop Albert and the Brothers of the Order that converts should not be deprived of their personal freedom and property, and in 1232 the Emperor Friedrich II ordered that the new converts should remain free subjects of the Holy Roman Empire. These orders, however, were disregarded by the knights,

¹¹ Grant Watson, 27.

who reduced the Latvians and Estonians to a state of serfdom, so that their lot was miserable in the extreme. Their status varied according to the period and according to the district, but for the most part they were attached to the soil (period AD 1494) and they had to work as many as five days a week for the seigneur. The general attitude of the Order toward the Church was one of complete disregard.¹²

The German clerical leadership declined in the Baltic after the decisive battle of the Teutonic Order against the united Lithuanian-Polish forces at Tannenberg in 1420.¹³ At first the Danes, then the Swedes captured Estonia, and during the later years of the Livonian War, the Poles attacked Livonia from the south. "At the peace settlement in 1582, . . . Livonia was divided between the Swedes and the Poles. Kurzeme became a semi-independent duchy under Polish suzerainty."¹⁴ Since the middle of the sixteenth century, Russia under Ivan the Terrible also became a constant threat to Livonia.

For a century, the Swedes prevailed in Livonia. Although their rule also did not mean freedom for the Latvian peasants, Swedish king Gustavus Adolfus encouraged the Latvian peasants' cultural and educational development by opening elementary schools in each parish and three secondary schools in Riga, Dorpat (Tartu) and Reval (Tallin).

The peasants were still attached to the soil, but they were assured of their land and their position was greatly improved. The private justice of the nobles was restricted, and the dreaded *jus vitae et necis* of the landlord over the serf was abolished. Efforts were made to raise the status of the

¹² Grant Watson, 29.

¹³ Arnolds Spekke, *History of Latvia: An Outline*, trans. H. Kundziņš (Stockholm: M. Goppers, 1957), 164.

¹⁴ Grant Watson, 29.

Latvian peasants to that of the Swedish peasants, but they were not successful as the resistance of the Baltic nobles was too strong.¹⁵

Gustavus Adolfus even authorized the founding of the University of Dorpat, in 1632, where the sons of peasants could study Protestant theology in the Estonian and Latvian languages. Swedish king Charles XI graciously paid for the translation of the Bible into the Latvian language. No wonder that, despite their suffering under the German landlords, the Latvian peasants considered this period the “Happy Epoch,”¹⁶ because they had hope that at least their children would have a better life. Sweden, Poland, and Russia were then the three major contenders for Livonia—for a very significant reason. Spekke declares,

We have thus tried to outline, geographically, the three principal routes of expansion which converged upon Livonia, **the key to the control of the Baltic Sea** [emphasis mine]. But there was still a fourth power--the Holy Roman Empire, of which Livonia for more than three centuries had nominally been a component part. However, very little help could reach this distant province, because the Empire, built up by Charlemagne and by various succeeding dynasties, was passing through one of its most critical periods.¹⁷

Finally, the army of Peter the Great drove the Swedes out of Livonia in 1701. Because St. Petersburg, Russia’s only harbor on the Baltic Sea, freezes in winter, all of the Russian czars wanted the Baltic lands to get a “window to the West.” When the Russian-Tartar armies marched into Livonia, they caused panic among the Latvian peasants and the German landlords, and for a good reason. Spekke declares,

¹⁵ Grant Watson, 29.

¹⁶ Grant Watson, p. 29, quotes Latvian historian Schwabe here.

¹⁷ Spekke, 182.

It is hardly necessary to comment on the ruthless methods of warfare in those times; however, some of the eastern bestialities practiced by those barbarians were such as to horrify the rulers of the west and to make them see in the Muscovite Tsar a new Anti-Christ who had come to endanger their very existence.¹⁸

The Russian-Tartar armies overran Livonia, devastated it completely, and annexed it as Russia's Baltic Province; Peter the Great had finally attained Russia's great desire.

Rule by the Cruel German Gentry

While political powers in the Baltic lands changed hands and various neighboring kingdoms ruled the territory of Livonia, the German landed gentry managed to retain its privileges on large estates in the country and on city councils in the cities. The only ones who really suffered from these experiences were the Baltic people, who worked as virtual slaves for their German overlords, were often beaten and were bought and sold like cattle, as the German Pastor A. Hupel attested in his *Topographische Nachrichten von Lief- und Ehstland* in 1777:

The [Baltic] people here are better wares than the Negroes of the American colonies: a servant can be bought for 30-50 silver rubles; an artisan, cook or weaver for anything up to 100 rubles; the same price is asked for a whole family; a maidservant rarely costing more than 10 rubles, while children can be bought for four rubles each. Agricultural workers and their children are sold or bartered for horses, dogs, pipes, etc.¹⁹

About this lawless time in history, the former British diplomat Herbert Grant Watson quotes the Italian traveler Le Clerc having given the following account of the situation in Livonia:

¹⁸ Spekke, 184.

¹⁹ Bilmanis, *Dictionary of Events in Latvia*, 4.

In Livonia the nobility is everything. It is the Government and the State. The duty of the people is to feed the seigneurs, who can sell them and separate them from their wives and families. They are afraid of everything, except death.²⁰

Grant Watson, commenting on the ruthless German gentry, also states, "In all their dealings with their serfs, the nobles were above the law and as late as 1762, Catherine II declared that there was no law by which a noble who was guilty of killing a peasant could be condemned."²¹

No wonder that most of the thousands of Latvian folk songs talk of cruel masters, of abused orphans subjected to never-ending work, of comfort within the community, of the sun's warming freezing orphan children:

Kas tie tādi, kas dziedāja
Bez saulītes vakarā?
Tie bij visi bāra bērni,
Bargu kungu klausītāj'.

Who were those, who sang
After sunset in the night?
All of them were orphan children
Made obedient to harsh lords.

Kurin ugun', silda gaisu,
Slauka gaužas asaras,
Krimsta cietu pelavmaizi,
Avotiņā mērcēdam'.

[They] Make a fire, warm the air,
Wipe away their bitter tears,
Gnaw on hard chaff-bread,
Dunking it into the stream.

One of the ancient songs tells of anger and rebellion, comparing the people's anger with a big black snake that will avenge them for their abuse:

Melna čūska miltus mala
Vidū jūrā uz akmens.
Tos būs ēsti tiem kungiem,
Kas bez saules strādināj'.
Ū-ū-ū-ū-ū-ū-ū-ū.

A black snake ground flour
On a stone in the middle of the sea.
That is to be eaten by those masters
Who worked us beyond sunlight.
Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh.

²⁰ Grant Watson, 30, cites Le Clerc, *Storia della Russia* (n.p.: n.d.).

²¹ Grant Watson, 30-31.

Among the otherwise compliant German clergy, some voices of discontent arose. One of them was Pastor Garlieb Merkel, who made very loud and touching appeals to the world. The peasants themselves at the end of the eighteenth century rose up against their oppressors. Such peasant riots are documented as having occurred in 1777, 1784, 1797, and 1802. In fact, the Governor General of Livonia (Latvia and Estonia) in 1784 was forced to inform Empress Catherine the Great of widespread peasant disturbances: "I can only affirm that rebellions have spread over the whole province, and I am not aware of a single district where there are no disturbances."²² Catherine II tried to effect some reforms in the provinces, but the German landed gentry did not carry them out.

When Napoleon invaded the Baltic Provinces, he tried to relieve the suffering of the population, but the measures did not last long, as Grant Watson points out:

The Order of the Teutonic Knights was formally abolished by Napoleon in 1809, but the Baltic nobles remained in control of the provincial and local governments and later the Governors-General appointed by the Czar were usually Baltic Germans. The nobles kept possession of their estates and even regained some feudal privileges which they had lost.²³

Czar Alexander II abolished slavery in Russia only in 1882. Abuse continued into the early part of the twentieth century.

During these harsh times of oppression, songs for every aspect of life from the cradle to the grave kept alive the spirit of the Latvian people. Bards were held in high esteem. Hymns are even today an important part of worship. Song festivals united the

²² Spekke, 278.

²³ Grant Watson, 31.

nation during the rise of national consciousness in the nineteenth century, but even the mention of independence was the most daring thought among the upcoming intelligentsia. In 1905 a workers' march in Riga along the Daugava River, in sympathy with the striking workers in St. Petersburg, ended in bloody massacre, imprisonment and deportations.

After the National Awakening, the various socialist and nationalist Latvian factions in Latvia "desired not only to obtain political independence, but they also demanded a proper share in the national and local governments and the suppression of the privileges of the nobles."²⁴ Most of all, they wanted to break up the immense estates held by the German nobles. The size of these estates was quite out of proportion to the size of the country, as Grant Watson points out:

Although the Baltic nobles formed only a small minority, 3.4 per cent of the whole population, they owned about 60 per cent of the land; 1,300 of their manors contained more than 5,000 acres each, while the average size of a Latvian holding was 115 acres. Professor Schwabe mentions the manor of Dundaga as containing 175,000 acres, [of] Pope 127,500 acres. . . . The family of the Barons Wolff owned 36 manors in all, with an acreage of 724,000.²⁵

For centuries the Latvians had toiled on the soil and had been good farmers. As they became more prosperous, could send their sons to schools of higher education, and participated more in cultural activities themselves, they desired to own more land, but

on account of the estates of the Barons, no land was available for them, and there was an acute land hunger among the Latvian agricultural workers. So the demand to possess land became a strong incentive to

²⁴ Grant Watson, 43.

²⁵ Grant Watson, 43.

action in the social revolution. In fact, in no revolution was 'land hunger' such a strong incentive as in the Latvian.²⁶

At the time of the 1905 revolution after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, this strong desire for land finally found its expression among the political activists in Latvia.

According to Grant Watson,

Some political activists attacked all the Russian institutions and also those of the Baltic aristocracy, and in the country they burnt down the manor houses and destroyed the property of the nobles. The latter appealed to the Czar for protection and regiments of Cossacks and Dragoons were sent, who suppressed the revolt with much bloodshed and cruelty. The breach between the Latvians and the Baltic nobles was still further widened.²⁷

About 5,000 Latvian political activists were forced to escape abroad, not only to Western Europe--including neutral Switzerland, where they were haunted by the dreaded Russian secret police--but also to the United States of America.²⁸ In the countryside of Latvia, the Russian czarist gendarmes were even more cruel than the German landlords in seeking to reduce Latvian political activity.

World War I

Many of my parishioners in their nineties remember World War I. Some of them have shared with me their war experiences and their impressions of the political situation of that time. Russia was weakened by its defeat in the Crimea; its armed forces did not want to fight another war, this time against the West. However, in 1915 the German army

²⁶ Grant Watson, 44.

²⁷ Grant Watson, 33.

²⁸ Uldis Ģermanis, "World War I," in *Latvia*, ed. Vito Vitauts Šīmanis, et al. (St. Charles, Ill.: The Book Latvia, 1984), 115.

occupied Kurzeme, the western region of Latvia, and was advancing toward Riga, the capital of the Latvian province. The Russian troops started retreating to Russia, and weak Nicholas II had no control over them. The poet Jānis Rainis, in political exile in Switzerland, dispatched a letter to Latvian correspondent Natālija Robiņa in Paris, urging her to write an article on the critical situation in Latvia, after the Germans invaded Kurzeme and all of Latvia was in danger of occupation. Originally Rainis saw a greater danger in the Kaiser's systematic Germanization than in the Czar's clumsy and unsystematic Russification.

The Germans have invaded Kurzeme and have occupied Liepāja for two weeks. We are in the greatest danger, and all of our people should defend themselves and help the Russian army; for all of us are aware that we will persist against the unsystematic attempts of Russification but not against the systematic Germanization, as it is practiced in Belgium. Against the burning out of the whole land, against the slaughter and expulsion of the whole population, we as a small nation, will not persist. . . . This must be made known to the sympathetic French public and society, so that they could influence the Russian government: Now it is high time to give rights to the Latvians so that we would have something to defend against the offensive of the Germans. The Russians capture all arms from the Latvians, while they permit the Germans and barons to carry them. From far-away battle fields, Latvian soldiers must be called back to the Balticum; then we will soon drive out the Germans.²⁹

In face of this great danger, the Latvians asked for the right to defend Latvia as an autonomous state under Russia, but the Russian government denied their requests. Then they urgently asked Czar Nicholas II for permission to organize their own army to defend their native soil. Finally, when St. Petersburg became endangered, in July 1915 Czar Nicholas II authorized the organization of the Latvian Riflemen's Battalion, to be led by

²⁹ Rainis, "Vēstules," 152-53.

Latvian officers, with commands to be given in the Latvian language. For the first time in history the Latvians fought for their own country under their own crimson-white-crimson colored flag.³⁰ Each soldier bore on his visor the insignia of the rising sun. They also had regimental flags with patriotic slogans in Latvian, such as the inscription “The freedom of our Fatherland we will buy with our blood” on the flag of the Fifth Zemgale Battalion. The Czar was afraid to make concessions to the Latvian nationalists. “When Nicholas II saw the first illustration of this flag, he wrote across it, ‘This may be understood in many ways.’ Nonetheless it was approved.”³¹ For the first time Latvian officers commanded them. The formation of the Riflemen’s Battalions as a viable defense force for the country caused so much jubilation that their departure for the front became a major national manifestation. The poet Edvards Virza wrote of this time:

The whole nation was looking forward to a new era, to revenge on the oppressors who had filled our story with terror, despair and tears. Deep inside our people a voice said that they had to march in the first ranks in this war and through self-denying efforts to obtain everlasting rights, so that history should record that they are free people.³²

These Latvian Riflemen’s Regiments, with the huge reserve unit, had about 35,000 men. However, these units were often used as shock troops, suffered frequent

³⁰ According to legend, the colors for the Latvian flag originated in this way: when an ancient Latvian tribe was in battle, its brave chieftain was mortally wounded; his men laid him on a white cloth, and there he died from his battle wounds. In his honor, the men carried the blood-stained crimson-white-crimson cloth as their flag into battle and gained victory. See P. Dreimanis, *Latvju tautas vēsture* [History of the Latvian people] (Copenhagen: Imanta, 1958), 130.

³¹ Spekke, 329.

³² Edvards Virza, cited by Spekke, 329-30.

losses, and required frequent reinforcements. Therefore, the actual number of Latvians in the Riflemen's Regiments was twice the number mentioned above.³³ The Riflemen's Regiments soon earned the respect of their allies and their enemies in their defense of Riga.

German advances toward Riga worried the headquarters of the Russian 12th Army since it was the main Russian force on the Northern front. After brief training, the first Latvian units were hurriedly sent to the front just west of Riga. In a series of bold and well-planned counterattacks (especially by the command of Lt. Fridrichs Briedis) Latvians managed to push the Germans back, thus improving the general condition of the Riga front. From this time on, the Supreme Commander's orders of the day lauded the Latvian war effort. This was immediately picked up by the Russian and Latvian press and had its effect on the entire nation. Allied military missions and war correspondents visited the battalions. News of this fighting force began to appear in the Western press. Even the Germans noted the appearance of a worthy opponent and gave it complimentary coverage.³⁴

On December 23, 1916, the "Christmas Battles" on the Daugava River during a snow storm presented the greatest challenge for the Latvian Riflemen's Battalion as they held the front firm against the attacking German army for twenty-five days, even without the support of the retreating Russian army, because the two supporting Russian regiments had mutinied. The Latvians lost 80,000 brave warriors at the Daugava River and on one of its islands, aptly named "Isle of Death." However, they did not attain their anticipated goals, because the czarist Russian army had betrayed all their valiant efforts: "Allegations that the Russian command had betrayed the Latvian army were never proven, but the

³³ Ģermanis, "World War I," 115.

³⁴ Ģermanis, "World War I," 116.

troops were rightfully angry at the ruthless way they had been used. This anger was soon to be exploited by the skillful Bolshevik agitators.”³⁵

As the Russian army retreated and all of Russia became endangered, open rebellion erupted--the Russian Revolution, which toppled the ineffective monarchy. During the 1917 Revolution in St. Petersburg, among Lenin's most trusted guards were some rebellious Latvian fighters who had become disgusted with the Russian Empire's military command. They hoped that the Socialist Movement would bring freedom to their own land.³⁶ Eventually, even more Latvian troops joined the movement, and fought in battles all over Russia. When in February 1918 the Germans resumed their offensive to force the Lenin government to capitulate and accept German peace terms, the Russian army did not resist. Thus, Bolshevik representatives signed a separate peace treaty with Germany on March 3, 1918, at Brest-Litovsk. For the remaining Latvian Riflemen's Regiments the outlook in Latvia was grim. Uldis Ģermanis tells the story in this way:

To avoid capture, large parts of the Latvian Riflemen's Regiments retreated into Russia. In April 1918, these units, with other Latvian military units formed the first Latvian Riflemen's Division. Col. Jukums Vācietis commanded this so-called "Latdivision." With the demobilization of the Russian army, the Latdivision emerged as the only disciplined and capable fighting force left in Soviet Russia. It subsequently went on to play a major part in the ensuing Russian Civil War, saving Lenin's Soviet government from collapse on numerous occasions during the summer and fall of 1918.³⁷

³⁵ Ģermanis, "World War I," 117.

³⁶ As personally told me by the late Kārlis Kalniņš, then a member of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Wilmington and Vicinity, Wilmington, Delaware. Kalniņš had participated in the battles of the national Latvian Riflemen's Battalion.

³⁷ Ģermanis, "The War of National Liberation," in *Latvia*, 120.

Col. Vācietis believed that he was fighting on the Bolshevik side for the good of his own country by opposing Russia's reactionary forces, which stood for "one, indivisible Russia." In his book *Latviešu Strēlnieku vēsturiskā nozīme* (The Historical Significance of the Latvian Riflemen), he states, "The Latvian Riflemen secured freedom for the Baltic lands, making possible a free Latvia."³⁸ When Latvia was left defenseless without the Latvian Riflemen, the Germans occupied the entire country.

Defense of Latvia's Independence

However, the collapse and capitulation by the German monarchy in November 1918 on the western front changed Latvia's situation. Thus, representatives of all Latvian political parties, excluding the Communists and German collaborators, formed the Tautas Padome (National Council) in Riga. They declared the independence of the democratic Republic of Latvia on November 18, 1918.³⁹

The Provisional Government of Latvia had many problems in a devastated land. There were enemies within and outside its borders: Soviet Russia and the Latvian Bolsheviks opposed the nationalists; the old Russian Imperialists and their "White Armies" defended the czarist regime and tried to retain its former subjugated people and their territories; the West Russian Army, commanded by Count Bermont-Avaloff, the Baltic-German reactionaries and their Landeswehr Home-guard, pretended to aid czarist Russia but dreamed of restoring the Kaiser's Germany to greatness; German volunteer units, commanded by such adventurous officers as the "Political General," Count Rüdiger von

³⁸ Jukums Vācietis, cited by Ģērmanis, "War of National Liberation," 120.

³⁹ Ģērmanis, "War of National Liberation," 120.

der Goltz, sought to defend the Baltic-German gentry's interests against any independence movements by the Latvian and Estonian people. On the other hand, von der Goltz even made a statement that he had four enemies: "the German Soldiers' Council, the Latvian Government, the Bolsheviks and the Allied Powers, and lastly the German Government."⁴⁰

The various forces received their political and financial support from various influential German and Russian interest groups in Western Europe and even in the United States.

According to Gēmanis, financial support was coming from

czarist diplomats and politicians in Western Europe and the United States, German economic and military groups friendly to the Baltic-German gentry, and extremists who applauded Bolshevik successes. The Latvian nation, as well as the young neighboring republics, were practically unknown on the international scene. This allowed their enemies to spread disinformation and hostile propaganda, though it was often contradictory. Their aim was to discredit the Provisional Government, in order to prevent international recognition of the Latvian republic.⁴¹

The conflicting propaganda, used for different goals, caused these groups to fight among themselves. The Provisional Government used their conflict to its advantage and survival. On its side were Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland, because they, too, had just gained their independence and had common interests with Latvia. After Germany's capitulation in World War I, the Lenin government annulled the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty and prepared for a rapid military offensive against the Baltic republics, because Lenin wanted to bring them back into Russia's territory. This was to be the first step toward exporting their Soviet Socialist Revolution to Germany and other parts of the

⁴⁰ Rüdiger von der Goltz, cited by Spekke, 349.

⁴¹ Gēmanis, "War of National Liberation," 120-21.

world. Into this power play were drawn the Red Latvian Riflemen's Regiments, the best fighting force of the Red Army. Many of these men welcomed the chance to return to their own homeland. The Russian Bolshevik army's attack on Latvia began in December 1918, barely a month after Latvia's declaration of independence. These Riflemen "believed that they would resume the fight against the Germans, interrupted in 1917, to clean their land of this hated enemy. Bolshevik propaganda insisted that the Latvian Provisional Government led by [Karlis] Ulmanis' Cabinet was created by the Germans and was preparing to surrender the country to Germany."⁴²

By this time, the German army in Latvia was demoralized and withdrew to the west at the advance of the Red army. The Soviets approached Riga and set up their Soviet Latvian government, with Pēteris Stučka as leader, which declared the country an independent Soviet Latvian republic. Lenin in a decree immediately recognized it on December 22, 1918.

Ulmanis' government was unable to remain in Riga, and it moved to Liepāja, a coastal city and former war harbor of the czarist fleet. When his national forces had to leave Riga on January 3, 1919, the Red army succeeded in occupying most of Latvia's territory. The Latvian Provisional Government was holding out only in western Kurzeme. However, soon after the beginning of the year 1919, Soviet rule in Latvia began to decrease for several reasons: From the north the Estonians and Finnish volunteers, having rid their country of Bolshevik forces, came to the aid of the Latvians; most of the Latvian Riflemen were not Communists, and were not interested in conquering the world; and the

⁴² Ģērmanis, "War of National Liberation," 121.

general population, upon witnessing Soviet abuses, became disappointed of their promises.⁴³ Ģērmanis describes the disillusionment that followed:

The landless populace of Latvia had expected the Stučka government to distribute the vast land holdings of the Baltic-Germans. It was a bitter disappointment when these estates were instead converted into collective farms, where the landless were forced to work for a pittance under Bolshevik overseers. The state had expropriated all businesses and repressed any private initiative. This worsened the already bad economic situation, causing shortages of food and other goods. Factory workers were likewise disappointed by these conditions and by Party takeover of their unions. The Latvian Riflemen, their ranks increased by mobilization, now doubted their reason for fighting, and quickly lost their combat spirit.⁴⁴

When the Communist Latvian government, under the leadership of Stučka, sensed the unrest in the army and civilian population, the Bolsheviks began a search for saboteurs and counterrevolutionaries. They instituted the “Red terror” to control the situation, but this turned the nation even more against the Stučka Soviet Latvian government.

In western Kurzeme, the Latvian Provisional government had no fewer troubles. Kārlis Ulmanis hurriedly gathered his forces for a counterattack against the Soviets. However, the German gentry forced Ulmanis to accept concessions of including the German Landeswehr and German volunteer units in the Latvian forces, and of agreeing that the anti-Latvian German general, Count Rüdiger von der Goltz, would be in charge of the 13,000 man army.⁴⁵ General von der Goltz was obsessed with fantastic military and

⁴³ Ģērmanis, “War of National Liberation,” 122.

⁴⁴ Ģērmanis, “War of National Liberation,” 123.

⁴⁵ Ģērmanis, “War of National Liberation,” 123.

political goals: he envisioned, as he explained in his later book,⁴⁶ that he expected to “defeat the Bolsheviks, restore the monarchy in Russia and with the help of the Russians, also restore the German monarchy, then resume the war against the Western Allies.” To thwart General von der Goltz’s ambitions and to free his country, Ulmanis increased his armed forces by conscription and armed them with weapons supplied to him by British warships in the Liepāja harbor. The Lithuanian government gave Ulmanis a desperately needed loan to finance the war effort. Estonia, which had suffered less in World War I, decided to help the democratic Latvian war effort in a common war for national liberation; therefore, the Estonians and Latvians concluded a defense treaty, and K. Ulmanis dispatched Col. Jorģis Zemitāns by sea to Estonia to lead the liberation from the northern front.⁴⁷

When Latvian and German units moved in from the west, liberated several strategic cities, and were ready to liberate Riga, von der Goltz stopped the attack for political reasons. He sent to Liepāja some of his German units, who staged an armed uprising, known as the April 16 Putsch, against the democratic Latvian Provisional Government.⁴⁸ The Ulmanis government in Liepāja was forced to suspend its operation and board the ship *Saratov*, under the protection of British warships. As confiscated evidence proved, the German forces planned to annex the Baltic region to German lands:

⁴⁶ Ģērmanis, “War of National Liberation,” citing Rüdiger von der Goltz, *Als Politischer General im Osten* (Leipzig: n.p., 1936).

⁴⁷ Ģērmanis, “War of National Liberation,” 123.

⁴⁸ Ģērmanis, “War of National Liberation,” 123.

As early as 19 February [1919] the customs authorities at Liepāja had detained a suspicious parcel which had been on board of the *Rūneborg*. This parcel, whose owner, a certain von Stryck, had managed to clear out, contained a draft of the well-known proposal for incorporation of the Baltic countries within the German Empire, this time to be implemented after the overthrow of the Latvian Provisional Government.⁴⁹

On May 11, the Germans set up a Latvian puppet government in Liepāja, headed by the conservative Latvian pastor and writer Andrievs Niedra. However, this puppet government was recognized only by the Baltic-German gentry and by von der Goltz; the Latvian fighting forces remained loyal to their democratic government, yet did not confront the German forces. The drive eastward continued, and the German forces took Riga by May 22, 1919; the Latvian forces joined them the following day.⁵⁰ While Latvian guerilla forces supported the liberation effort from the Soviet army in central Latvia, again the German forces—ignoring a direct order from British General Sir Hubert Gough to attack only Soviet forces—pushed north and attacked the Estonian and North-Latvian army, to prevent the stabilization of independent Estonia and independent Latvia.

In a decisive victory, the Baltic forces beat the German Landeswehr reactionary units. The Western Allies subsequently intervened and protected the Germans from total defeat by forcing the opposing sides into an armistice on July 3, 1919. According to the terms of the armistice, the Germans had to leave Riga and the Landeswehr was to attack eastward to force out the Soviet Russian forces. The Allies put British Colonel Alexander

⁴⁹ Spekke, 349-50.

⁵⁰ Gērmanis, "War of National Liberation," 123.

in command of the Landeswehr. They ordered those Germans who were not Latvian citizens to leave Latvia altogether.⁵¹

On July 8, aboard the ship *Saratov*, the legitimate Latvian government, with Mr. Ulmanis at its head, returned to Riga. The crowds were larger and more jubilant than ever and now included Allied representatives and the commanders of both the Northern and Southern Brigades.⁵²

The German-controlled Niedra government fled to German-held Jelgava in central Latvia. The two Latvian brigades were soon integrated into the Latvian Army, and further enlistments brought the force to divisional strength. The elderly General Sīmansons became Commander of the Latvian Army. Only eastern Latvia, the region of Latgale, needed to be liberated from the Soviets. All seemed to go well, but again von der Goltz had different ideas. Neither he nor the German gentry wanted an independent Latvia and Estonia. Therefore, von der Goltz refused to obey the July 3 armistice and did not withdraw his forces; instead he obtained for his purposes a new ally--Pavel Bermont, the self-styled Count Avaloff, a Russian adventurer.

The latter assembled an army of Russian war prisoners in German camps and began a campaign that was financed by German industrialists. On September 26, 1919, von der Goltz concluded a treaty with Bermont. The German forces in Latvia were renamed the "West-Russian Army" and commanded by Bermont, but were actually dominated by von der Goltz. The army now included many new German volunteers.⁵³

⁵¹ Ģērmanis, "War of National Liberation," 124.

⁵² Ģērmanis, "War of National Liberation," 124.

⁵³ Ģērmanis, "War of National Liberation," 124.

This armed force planned to destroy the new Latvian and Estonian republics. Goltz also envisioned that with Pastor Niedra as Governor the regions would revert to Russian provinces.⁵⁴

At the beginning of October, after General Sir Hubert Gough's unsuccessfully tried to negotiate with Bermont for the latter to leave for the Bolshevik front, the "West-Russian Army" of von der Goltz-Bermont, with a force of 50,000 well-armed troops, of which 40,000 were Germans, equipped with 100 pieces of artillery, armored cars and planes, made an attack on Riga on October 8, 1919, on the pretext that the Ulmanis government was friendly to Soviet-Russia. Their attack coincided with the Ulmanis government forces' attack on Bolshevik forces in Latgale. Riga was defended by only 5,000 government forces and six artillery guns.⁵⁵ Despite the heavy odds, von der Goltz was unable to capture Riga, for both young and old Latvians rushed to enlist and defend their country. Again the whole nation reacted in support, as Spekke describes:

Almost the whole population of Riga and the surrounding districts volunteered for the defense of the capital. The enthusiasm and determination which consolidated and animated the entire Latvian nation at this juncture was unprecedented and has hardly been surpassed.⁵⁶

As the battle raged on, several French and British warships, berthed close to Riga, observed the action, but they did not participate in the battle. Then, in total disregard for international rules, Bermont's artillery even attacked the Allies.

⁵⁴ Gērmanis, "War of National Liberation," 124.

⁵⁵ Spekke, 354.

⁵⁶ Spekke, 354.

Finally, after Bermont's artillery shelled the Allied ships, Latvians managed to enlist their aid. On November 3, the Allied ships opened fire on the western bank of the Daugava. Aided by the Allies' fire, Latvians attacked their ancient enemy with enthusiasm. They quickly liberated the shores of the Daugava. On the 11th of November, the Latvian government founded the highest military order, *Lāčplēsis* (The Bear Slayer), which carried the motto "For Latvia."⁵⁷

One of these men thus decorated for outstanding bravery is a member of my congregation. He is Senior Lieutenant Arvīds Lauris, decorated with the prestigious Bear slayer Medal, who is 95 years old and is the youngest of only six survivors (the oldest is 102).⁵⁸ He is living history.

Although the representatives of the Allies proposed another armistice after this victory, the Latvians were now determined not to stop fighting until all of their land was cleared of enemy forces. On November 28, 1919, they pursued the demoralized remnants

⁵⁷ The name *Lāčplēsis* is based on an ancient Latvian legend of a strong man who tore apart a bear at the jaws. Andrejs Pumpurs, foremost poet of the National Awakening, published his heroic epos, *Lāčplēsis*, in 1888. The poet and playwright Jānis Rainis wrote his nationalistic play *Uguns un nakts* (Fire and Night) between 1903 and 1905, and this play had been performed to capacity audiences since 1911. In this play the hero Lāčplēsis (symbol for freedom fighter) rescues the heroine *Laimdota* (symbol for Latvia), and peace reigns in the land. But he is tricked by the local Germans into fighting the "Black Knight," symbol of the Russian aggressor. Both fall into the Daugava River in their fierce struggle, but their fateful struggle continues unabated until the final victory sometime in the future. The struggle, which requires even more wisdom than pure physical strength, seems destined forever. As J. Rainis teaches his hero Lāčplēsis, "Only he who achieves inner freedom can enter into the great life." (J. Rainis [Jānis Pliekšāns], *Uguns un nakts* [Fire and night], vol. 15 of *J. Rainis: Raksti* [J. Rainis: Works], ed. K. Dziļleja [Vāsterås, Sweden: "Ziemeļblāzma"/Jānis Abučs, 1964], 101). During the heat of battle for the defense of Riga, this play was performed in the capital numerous times, rallying the people for the cause of Latvia's freedom.

⁵⁸ Vilmārs Kukainis, "Lāčplēša kaŗa ordeŗa kavalierim virsleitnantam Arvīdam Laurim - 95" [Lāčplēsis Military Order Cavalier Senior Lieutenant Arvīds Lauris is 95], *Laiks* (New York), 13 July 1996, 10.

of the “West-Russian Army” into Lithuania. Then they quickly concluded a military alliance with Poland and coordinated the combined efforts against the remnants of the Bolshevik army in Latgale. On January 3, 1920, the Latvian and Polish forces took Daugavpils; on January 21 they liberated Rēzekne; by February 1 they drove the enemy to the eastern frontiers, and Latvia was finally free.

All needed now was the Allies’ de jure recognition of the Baltic States. The Western Powers wanted such approval first to come from the White Russian government. However, the latter remained committed to “Russia One and Indivisible” and therefore they did not want to let go of their former subject peoples: Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Finns, Ukrainians.⁵⁹ For that reason, the Baltic States sought peace negotiations with the Soviet Union.

Grant Watson’s book is based on the official British documents, partly on German and other writings of the period and of his own experiences on a diplomatic mission to the Baltic Provinces in 1919. He states,

The publication of President Wilson’s ‘Fourteen Points,’ including the right of the self-determination for all nations, greatly encouraged the Latvians in their campaign for independence and, after the Bolshevik ‘November’ Revolution of 1917, they decided to separate from Russia. They had no sympathy with the excesses of the Communists.⁶⁰

The Allies, however, did not wish to take the lead in formally recognizing the independence of the three Baltic States, but “waited for them to come to terms with their

⁵⁹ Gērmanis, “War of National Liberation,” 126.

⁶⁰ Grant Watson, 33-34.

powerful Russian neighbor.”⁶¹ Quite unexpectedly, Lenin and the Bolsheviks changed their policy toward the Baltic States and already in the autumn of 1919 expressed their readiness for armistice negotiations. Grant Watson attributes this fact to the stronger than expected resistance by the Baltic armies, and their general abstention from involvement in the Russian civil war. Lenin therefore felt that his western front was secure from attack. Historian Uldis Ģērmanis observed that the Baltic States likewise wanted peace and a promise of nonaggression from Lenin’s government:

The Baltic States therefore decided to seek peace negotiations with the Soviet Union. Estonia was the first to sign a treaty and Latvia signed a Treaty of Peace in August 1920. Therein the Soviet Union declared that it **‘recognizes unconditionally the independence and sovereignty of Latvia and declines, voluntarily and for all times, all claims on the Latvian people and territory which formerly belonged to Russia’** [emphasis in original].⁶²

The Soviet Union became the first major country to extend de jure recognition to Latvia, feeling compelled to do so. In a speech made in 1920 Lenin had explained: “If all these small states had marched against us we certainly would have been defeated. This should be clear to everyone. But they did not march against us.”⁶³

The imperialistic attitudes of the anti-Bolsheviks, and the failure of the Western Powers to recognize the significance of the non-Russian peoples’ aspirations for

⁶¹ Grant Watson, 86.

⁶² See also Alfred Bilmanis, *Latvia as an Independent State* (Washington, D.C.: Latvian Legation, 1947), 51.

⁶³ Ģērmanis, “War of National Liberation,” 126.

independence, finally sealed the fate of the White Russian Army and ended the Russian civil war.

At the end of 1920, with the Latvian Division again playing a significant role, General Wrangel's forces, the last of the White Armies, were defeated in Crimea. With this defeat hopes for the restoration of the old Russian colonial empire collapsed. Only then did the Western Allies and Japan recognize Latvia and Estonia *de jure*. The United States followed suit in July 1922. Two months later Latvia became a member of the League of Nations.⁶⁴

The Latvian people had suffered much during those seven hundred years of oppression by various major European powers, all determined to control this small, yet strategically so important territory. Finally, freedom was won by the blood of many brave Latvian men who had given their lives so that there would be a free, independent Latvian nation, equal to all other nations on the continent of Europe and the world. World War I and the war for Latvia's independence were over, and with thanksgiving to the Almighty God the Latvian people raised their voices and sang their anthem as a free nation:

Dievs, svētī Latviju, mūs' dārgo tēviju,
Svētī jel Latviju, ak, svētī jel to!
Kur latvju meitas zied,
Kur latvju dēli dzied,
Laid mums tur laimē diet,
Mūs' Latvijā!⁶⁵

God, bless Latvia, our dear fatherland,
Do bless Latvia, oh, do bless it!
Where Latvian daughters blossom,
Where Latvian sons sing,
Let us there dance in joy
In our Latvia!

Despite this happy ending, there was much to be done to overcome the hardships caused by the devastation of long periods of war. The nation was poor, the land-- neglected. But there was hope, for Kārlis Ulmanis, Latvia's president, made sure that

⁶⁴ Ģermanis, "War of National Liberation," 126.

⁶⁵ Authored and composed by Kārlis Baumanis; arr. by Jāzeps Vītols; *Dziesmu grāmata*, No. 2.

veterans and the formerly landless farm population received farm acreage from the huge landed estates of the country. Their joy is expressed by a line in the theme song of the vigilant soldiers' association "Daugavas Vanagi" (Hawks of the Daugava): "Kāds prieks paša sētā nu taku ir mīt, / Kāds prieks paša druvā nu vagu ir dzīt! . . ." (What a joy it is to walk on the path of one's own farmstead, What a joy it is to drive a furrow in one's own field!). On the other hand, the suffering from the trauma of war lingered on, not only for a few years, but for several decades.

Such was the case of one of my parishioners whom I shall call Kārlis, whose family life and love had been destroyed during the war by the sudden irrational, criminal act of his own farmhands.

Kārlis' Grief Story: Suffering and Hope

One of my parishioners, Kārlis, was a small farmer in Latvia at that tumultuous time of war for Latvian national independence. His grief story reflects the terror the general population in Latvia had to endure during the confusion that reigned in the armed forces of the opposing powers.

Kārlis and his wife were happily married. They had two small children--Rūdis un Monta. He was a good, hard-working person. Several Russian farmhands worked on their farm. When Bermont, in his last attempt to overcome the Baltic forces, organized an army of these Russians, the charged political atmosphere brought out the worst in some people.

That was when Kārlis experienced the worst trauma of his life. He had gone to the village and had left his wife with the children on the farm. When he returned, at first he could not believe the sight: on the ground lay his wife, her head split open with an ax, the

blood running out, and the children huddled nearby, frozen in terror. It had been the work of the farmhands who apparently wanted to gain some favor from the puppet regime for their “heroic” deed. Kārlis’ life was shattered. What could he do with these small children alone? To love them was not enough; they needed the care of a mother.

The neighbors tried to help as much as they could over the weeks that followed, but it was not enough. Finally Kārlis went back to the village, sought out the plain-looking schoolteacher, who was single, and asked her to marry him and care for his children. Liene agreed, and they were married. According to Kārlis, she was a good mother and tried to be a good wife. The children became adjusted to their new mother and accepted her care and love. They survived as best they could under the circumstances. During the Second World War, the family survived the first Soviet onslaught, but then they fled west. They settled in the countryside in Pennsylvania. As he grew older, Kārlis realized that he was not really physically attracted to his second wife. He started looking at other women. He started a romance with a widow, which gradually faded away.

Kārlis’ daughter Monta was very intelligent. She became a schoolteacher, was married and had two sons. Holding down a job and being a conscientious and loving wife and mother, strained her physical well-being. Everything seemed fine; then she developed muscular sclerosis. Seeing her suffer so graciously and meekly, Kārlis grew increasingly depressed. He blamed himself for having left his first wife alone on the farm and her subsequent murder, and for Monta’s suffering, which he interpreted as God’s punishment for his own sins of having strayed in his marriage. Monta’s condition worsened until she

died. Kārlis' son Rūdis was drinking excessively and became a burden on the family, for which Kārlis also blamed himself.

All of this guilt was too much for Kārlis to bear. In his depression, he accidentally fell and broke his hip bone. After the operation, he improved, but the operation apparently had not been very successful. His doctor wanted to do another hip operation, but Kārlis refused. Kārlis gained weight as he became physically less active. He read the Bible avidly, tried to get to church, and tried to keep up with work around the house. His prayers became more intense. Despite his growing faith and desperate search for peace, he could not rid himself of guilt and shame.

At the beginning of my ministry, I started working with Kārlis, and he shared his story. From my pastoral counseling perspective I observed that he suffered not only from post-traumatic stress disorder from his war experiences, but also from personal emotional and spiritual issues of guilt and shame. Through the process of telling his story, he worked through several conflicts, a little at a time. Kārlis' traumatic story reveals some of the power of storytelling to engage people in a process of facing conflicts and reconstructing meaning.

Although he did not believe in war and violence, for he was a peaceful and pious man, Kārlis was a player in the plot of war. He came to discover new truths about himself through the process of telling his story to me. At the end of his life, before he died, Kārlis attained peace with his family and with God. This story reflects the power of storytelling.

History Affects Our Lives

The tragic story of Kārlis shows that the effects of World War I and the struggle for Latvia's independence left a permanent impact on many families and individuals. Kārlis' life was damaged, and everyone around him was also affected. Because of the war, his first marriage remained unfulfilled; he entered a second marriage for the sake of his children, not for his own fulfillment. Because of this lack of fulfillment, Kārlis during midlife crisis committed adultery. His daughter's suffering and death, his son's alcoholism, and his own lifestyle caused Kārlis' guilt, which he could overcome only at the end of his life by sharing his story before his death, so that he could be liberated from his pain and suffering.

Thousands of other Latvians were similarly affected after the short two decades of national independence. World War II caused again much suffering in Latvia, which became "one great prison" for those who remained there under Communist occupation. Other Latvians were exiled to Siberia in mass deportations to suffer in slave labor camps and to die there. Those Latvians who had fled to the West to escape further persecution and harm in their native land also suffered the ravages of war and the hardships of exile. The emotional struggles in some of my parishioners' lives, as told through their stories in the following chapters, bear the message that historical events definitely caused their traumas.

CHAPTER 3

The Later History of Latvia with Trauma and Healing

Grieving from a war experience is emotionally and spiritually traumatic in many different ways. Not only does an individual lose friends and family members, but losses of other kinds also exist. Some of these other losses could be the loss of innocence or the loss of faith in the military, government, and beliefs in one's country. The loss of an individual's homeland, as described throughout the history of the Latvian people, also can occur. More subtle and yet as significant as these losses is the loss of an individual's lifestyle and secular and faith community due to war.

Since war is such a traumatic experience for most people, the psychological and spiritual battle within a person's mind and soul continues for years after the war is already over. Often the two emotions of anger and depression lie unresolved for such individuals. Ranging from mild to moderate to extreme, emotions of anger and/or depression are expressed in waking life and in the dream world. These feelings are often unconscious but are expressed through an individual's relationships among family members, friends, and work relationships. Often the individual who expresses these emotions of anger and/or depression is not even aware that the root of these emotions stems from his or her war experiences. Other individuals may be consciously aware that these emotions come from the war and are expressed in violent outbursts of rage when feeling angry, or in vivid flashbacks of war scenes within their dream world.

The unresolved anger of war veterans often stems from unresolved issues of grief. According to Aphrodite Matsakis, a specialist in post-traumatic stress disorders, veterans

of war use the emotion of anger as a way to feel more powerful.¹ In her style of therapy with veterans of war, she suggests that her clients begin learning new ways of asserting their strengths other than through the emotion of anger.² She suggests that people learn to get in touch with their feelings and to communicate in new ways with others. Matsakis reflects on the paradox of anger as used within the military setting. She states, "In military experiences, from basic training to combat, emotions such as fear and grief are considered signs of weakness. Anger, on the other hand, is not only tolerated, but encouraged. Hence anger can become the repository for all the feelings experienced during a military tour of duty."³ Anger is often disguised and is a defense against grief, confusion, fear, and the sense of powerlessness.⁴ Matsakis reflects that, unfortunately, grief over the death of a buddy or others in one's military unit might be expressed violently and inappropriately. She states, "Your grief over the death of someone might have been expressed, for example, through rape, abuse, or revenge killings of enemy prisoners or civilians."⁵ Matsakis also correctly reflects that anger-motivated acts can also be a cover-up for anger at oneself for having made a mistake, for having felt cowardly, or for not having lived up

¹ Aphrodite Matsakis, *I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors* (Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1992), 324.

² Matsakis, 332.

³ Matsakis, 332.

⁴ Matsakis, 332.

⁵ Matsakis, 332.

to one's own expectations as a soldier.⁶ Healing from a war-related PTSD involves grieving those who have died and grieving the death of parts of one's own self. Also to be grieved is the loss of one's religious or spiritual faith in the community and God.

Death is hard to grieve, and I believe that, through the sharing of one's war story, healing slowly occurs both emotionally and spiritually. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in her book *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, reflects upon the significance of facing the death of friends and family in her interesting and profound chapter, "Death and Growth: Unlikely Partners?" Kübler-Ross reflects that death can be very hard to face; we might be naturally tempted to avoid facing death and having to confront our feelings around death because it is often very painful. She states, "If you have the courage to deal with death when it comes into your life—to accept it as an important and valuable part of life—then, whether you are facing your own death, that of someone in your care, or that of a loved one, you will grow."⁷ Telling one's story, I do believe, is the beginning stage of facing death. Through telling the story of death and the listening to another person telling his or her story, the process of healing, walking through the painful process and stages of grief, can occur in one's life. Throughout the chapter I will be sharing the traumatic Latvian story of some of the painful and yet profound moments of World War II. History weaves through the personal stories of war in this chapter. To hear the traumatic war story told will hopefully bring new insights and sensitivities, greater awareness of this major war as it was

⁶ Matsakis, 221.

⁷ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone Books, 1975), 117.

played out in the Baltic countries, and appreciation for the power and healing that emerge from telling one's story.

World War II

After the great suffering in World War I, peace prevailed in the Baltic area for twenty-two years. The young independent states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania struggled to survive, become stabilized, and blossom. Then followed the disastrous Ribbentrop-Molotov Treaty, signed on August 28, 1939,⁸ because of a secret pact of nonaggression between Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin to divide their spheres of influence and leave the Baltic States to the Soviet Union. On September 1, 1939, not fearing a counterattack from the Soviet Union, Hitler started his "Blitzkrieg" by marching into Poland, then Czechoslovakia. The Soviet Union, ignoring Lenin's peace treaty with the Baltic States of 1920, and not fearing a counterattack from Germany, commenced its brutal attack and violation of the sovereignty of the Baltic States.

Soviet Occupation of the Baltic States

On June 14, 1940, a few minutes past midnight, the Soviet Foreign Commissar, Vyacheslav Molotov, handed an ultimatum to the Lithuanian Foreign Minister. The ultimatum accused Lithuania of "conspiring with Latvia and Estonia against the Soviet Union" and blamed the Lithuanian government for "attacks against Soviet military personnel stationed in Lithuania."⁹

⁸ Laimonis Streips, "Seizure and Destruction of Latvia by the Soviet Union," in *Latvia*, 182.

⁹ Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 182.

The accusations were incredulous. Why would three small peace-loving countries with a combined population of six million and no coordination among their armies dare to attack the mighty Soviet Union of 180 million with a very powerful army? The charge of an alleged abduction of two Soviet soldiers was just as groundless: the two soldiers in question, as it later became known, had deserted their units. The Soviet ultimatum contained the following demands: Lithuania should form a “government friendlier to the Soviet Union,” and it should “permit the stationing of an unlimited number of troops”¹⁰ on its soil. Of course, this was just a diplomatic way of demanding complete surrender to avoid the immediate bloodbath from a military opposition. The Lithuanian government had no other choice but to bow to all Soviet demands.¹¹ Lithuania was swiftly occupied, and this move cut off Latvia and Estonia from the West. On the same morning of June 14, Soviet troops deliberately overran a Latvian border guard post on the Russian frontier and killed several people. Both the Soviet ultimatum to Lithuania and the Soviet border attack on Latvia occurred on the opening day of a regional song festival in Daugavpils, a city in southeastern Latgale near the Russian border.

Word spread during the festival that Latvia’s President, Kārlis Ulmanis, who had been scheduled to deliver the opening address, would not attend because of the rapidly developing Soviet-Lithuanian crisis. The President addressed the gathering by radio instead. Knowing their fate would follow that of their neighbors, the festival audience broke into a spontaneous singing of the Latvian national anthem—three times. Little did they know

¹⁰ Streips, “Seizure and Destruction,” 182.

¹¹ Streips, “Seizure and Destruction,” 182.

that within a few days this very act would be punishable by torture and death.¹²

Latvia and Estonia received their ultimata on June 16, 1940. According to Andrejs Plakans,

During a confrontation between Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and Latvian ambassador Fricis Kociņš on June 16, Molotov added that the Soviet army had already received orders to cross the Latvian-USSR border regardless of whether the ultimatum was accepted.¹³

Against the governments' desperate protests, on the following day Soviet tank convoys rolled across their borders, and both Estonia and Latvia were occupied. At the same time, a Soviet ship that was berthed in the harbor of Riga, supposedly carrying some "supplies and replacements for Soviet military personnel in Latvia," actually contained a different kind of cargo: "The ship carried the administrators of the forthcoming regime, and people experienced in street demonstrations and political violence."¹⁴ Subsequently, about 200,000 infantry men and heavy air force units occupied Latvia from the east and south. Soviet propaganda called the occupation

a liberation of Latvia's working people from capitalist oppression, . . . [however] the dusty tanks and ill-dressed Soviet troops carried into the independent Latvian republic, maps clearly marked **The Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic** [emphasis in original].¹⁵

¹² Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 183.

¹³ Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History*, Studies of Nationalities Series (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), 144.

¹⁴ Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 184.

¹⁵ Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 184.

According to Plakans, “Soviet military maps from the fall of 1939 and school maps from the spring of 1940 show the three Baltic Countries as constituent republics of the Soviet Union.”¹⁶

The Process of Sovietization

Thus, in three short days Stalin’s military forces had destroyed the independence of the three small peaceful states on the Baltic Sea. What followed was the deliberate and systematic destruction of their infrastructure:

1. A systematic extermination of Latvia’s leaders—political, economical, educational, cultural and clerical.
2. The reduction of Latvia’s economy and living standards to that of the Soviet Union.
3. An introduction of Soviet cultural patterns and the Russian language into all areas of life.¹⁷

Soviet Assistant Foreign Commissar, Andrei Vishinsky, who later became the Soviet ambassador to the United Nations, a few days after the invasion, presented President Kārlis Ulmanis with the list of the new Cabinet, prepared and approved by the Kremlin. “Ulmanis, of course, had no say in the selection of ministers, but the Soviet News Agency TASS reported that President Ulmanis had approved the new Latvian Cabinet.”¹⁸ The list contained only one well-known Soviet sympathizer, “Augusts Kirchenšteins (1872-1963), a microbiologist at the University of Latvia and an active member of the

¹⁶ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 144.

¹⁷ Streips, “Seizure and Destruction,” 187.

¹⁸ Streips, “Seizure and Destruction,” 185.

Soviet-Latvian Friendship Society before 1940”;¹⁹ the others were unknowns, some unsuspected surprises. One of them was a popular writer, Vilis Lācis, who as Minister of the Interior soon started ordering the first executions. The rest were minor political and cultural figures who were most willing accomplices to Moscow’s plans. Convicted common criminals received high law enforcement posts. After their selection the Latvian national government ceased to exist. To celebrate the occasion, office and factory workers were forced to participate in demonstrations to “show their enthusiastic endorsement of the Latvian People’s government.”²⁰ The marchers were flanked by heavy Red Army units, and photographs of the marchers’ faces indicated they were in a funeral procession of free Latvia.²¹

One-party elections. The next step for the interim government was to call for election of the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) within ten days, which according to Latvian election law was legally invalid. However, since Latvian election law specified that any 100 Latvians could file a list of candidates, and having received Andrei Vishinsky’s assurances that they could file such a list, the leaders of independent Latvia’s political parties, in an unprecedented move, agreed on one common list of national candidates. They had received Andrei Vishinsky’s verbal assurances that their list of candidates would be honored. Of course, the Soviets were determined to let only their own candidates gain victory.

¹⁹ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 144-45.

²⁰ Streips, “Seizure and Destruction,” 185.

²¹ Streips, “Seizure and Destruction,” 185.

The offices of the National Party were ransacked and the leaders arrested and deported to the Soviet Union. Among them were former Latvian Prime Minister, Hugo Celmiņš; a general and hero of the War of National Liberation, Jānis Balodis; a writer and former Minister of Education, Atis Kēniņš, and many others. The offices were padlocked and election materials destroyed. Even these had been printed at risk, since all printers were ordered not to accommodate requests from the Nationalist candidates. Latvia was going to have its first Soviet-style one-list, one-party, one-candidate election.²²

The election was held as announced. The population deliberately revolted against the new regime by casting a very large number of invalid and empty ballots, as evidenced by an examination of voting records, accessible during the first stages of the subsequent German occupation.

The Soviet News Agency TASS, no doubt through error, announced the precise results of this election **24 hours prior to the closing of the polls** [emphasis in original]. 94.7% of the electorate was said to have participated, since election was compulsory to all Latvian citizens. Of these 97.6% were said to have cast their ballots for the Workers' and Independents' block.²³

Understandably, this charade brought an overwhelming victory to the government-sponsored candidates, reminding one of Stalin's words: "It is not important how people vote; what is important is how the votes are counted."²⁴ The newly elected pro-Soviet Saeima promptly proclaimed Latvia a Soviet Socialist Republic.

²² Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 186.

²³ Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 186.

²⁴ Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 186.

On July 21, Ulmanis resigned as president and turned his office over to Kirchenšteins. However, by foresight already in May he had made provisions for the diplomatic representation of Latvia abroad.

On May 18, Ulmanis gave the Latvian ambassador in England, Kārlis Zariņš (1879-1963), the authority to act on Latvia's behalf internationally in case the Latvian government ceased to be able to issue instructions to its diplomats.²⁵

In this way, the Latvian embassies in London and Washington, D.C., continued their functions uninterrupted through the years of Latvia's occupation up to the present.

On July 22, the confiscation of private property and businesses began: that included land, factories, banks, and apartment buildings. The legal owners of confiscated farms were permitted the use of up to 30 hectares (75 acres). On July 29, all other farmland was nationalized and distributed to smallholders. All church property was also confiscated.²⁶

The Soviet authorities had assured independent Latvia's President Kārlis Ulmanis of safe passage to Switzerland, but they broke their promise. On July 22, Ulmanis, a man who had dedicated his life to his country, was deported to Moscow, then Voroshilovsk, later to Stavropol.²⁷ He died there in 1942, but his grave has not been found to this day.

On August 5, a delegation of the Saeima, led by puppet Prime Minister Kirchenšteins, requested Stalin and the 7th Session of the Supreme Soviet that Latvia be

²⁵ Edgars Andersons, *Latvijas vēsture 1920-1940: Ārpolitika* [History of Latvia, 1920-1940: Foreign policy], 2 vols. (Stockholm: Daugava, 1984), 2:412-14.

²⁶ Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 186.

²⁷ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 145.

admitted into the family of Soviet Republics. Latvia promptly was made the 14th Soviet Republic. However, as Streips points out,

Andrei Vishinsky had overlooked an important fact. **Since this saeima was elected under the 1922 Constitution, it was not empowered to ask for the incorporation of the country into the Soviet Union. That could only be done by a referendum [emphasis in original].** The incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union, like the Soviet occupation and like the parliamentary election, was an **illegal act [emphasis in original].**²⁸

With all the occupational forces and the puppet regime of obedient people in place, all further actions came either directly from Moscow or the zealous interim leadership to assure a smooth transition of power in occupied Latvia.

Leadership changeover. Soviet authorities first seized and deported the former officials of the local and national political leadership, as well as law-enforcement and judiciary personnel. To facilitate the people's indoctrination of "right" Soviet attitudes, cultural leaders in other fields were also deported. Writers, composers, artists and others with "inappropriate, nationalistic views" were either arrested and deported, killed, or "rehabilitated."²⁹ The Latvian PEN and all literary societies were dissolved, printers were closely supervised, libraries were cleared of any anti-Social literature. Especially religious literature and Bibles were "removed from libraries and stored in special collections or

²⁸ Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 187.

²⁹ Such rehabilitation was forced posthumously on the well-known writer and poet Jānis Rainis (1865-1929), who in his early works, having been deported to Siberia for several years by the czarist government, sympathized with the workers' movement, but was definitely nationalistic since 1912. Posthumously the Soviet Latvian Government awarded him the Lenin Prize for his literature and the honorary title, "People's Poet."

ground into pulp.”³⁰ Some of this literature was kept under lock and key, and was accessible only to trusted personnel for propagandistic research. The basic aim for these actions was the deliberate concealment of truth. Andrei Vishinsky stated the Communist views quite clearly: “In our state, naturally there is and can be no place for freedom of speech, press, and so on, for the foes of socialism.”³¹

Since the leaders of the Kremlin and all Communist Party members had to profess atheism, and religion was therefore viewed as their greatest enemy, all their directives sought to eradicate religion from the hearts and minds of the people. No efforts were spared throughout the Soviet Union to achieve this aim—it was their fight against God.

The Soviet authorities were concerned to keep their system in control of every phase of operation. Their suspicions required constant vigilance over management and work force.

The personnel of governmental institutions and what now had become state enterprises were vetted for loyalty to the new regime; those judged to be “reactionary” or “potential counterrevolutionaries” were dismissed or moved to peripheral positions. Such actions, however, created serious problems because there were not enough “loyalists” to replace tens of thousands of experienced and knowledgeable employees.³²

Another deliberate effort was to destroy Soviet Latvia’s economy and the prosperity of its citizens to make the people work harder and to produce more for the state.

³⁰ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 145.

³¹ “House Report No. 2684,” *United States Congress*, 30 Dec. 1954.

³² Plakans, *The Latvians*, 145.

Latvia's considerable bounty of food, seed grains, select breeding cattle, industrial products and machinery were speedily shipped to the Soviet Union. Trains came back to Latvia empty, bearing the motto "Food for the starving Latvian people." As a result of this drainage, prices were subsequently raised by up to 400%.³³

Next, the authorities nationalized all savings accounts of more than 1,000 rubles. With this action they wiped out personal, retirement, and other funds. All industrial concerns, commercial establishments, productive real estate, and farmlands over 75 acres were also nationalized without compensation. By November 1940, just five months after the Soviet take-over, the Russian ruble had become the legal tender of the country.³⁴

Tortures and killings in prisons. Terror was used to eliminate patriots and unsuspecting, innocent people alike, for the sake of keeping the population "in line." This fear, to a much lesser degree, is still ingrained in many people, even in the Latvian people residing in the western world. Latvia's prisons became filled with ordinary people—most never came out alive to tell of their tortures. After their tortures and mutilations, they were buried in the prison yards.

An imprisoned teacher could give the following testimony only because the Soviet prison guards fled when the conquering German Army entered Riga toward the end of June 1941 and freed the inmates of the Central Prison in Riga.

I was brutally pushed into a room. I could not focus my eyes anymore and therefore it was only after some time that I realized that I was in one of the cells of the Central Prison. In the cell there were about forty men. Among them were two army officers that I knew. The rest—college and high

³³ Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 189.

³⁴ Streips, "Seizure and Destruction," 189.

school students, lawyers, policemen, other army personnel, laborers and even an invalid who had lost an arm in a mill accident.

The charges against them were unbelievably silly. One man had poured ashes containing some live coal into his back yard; the charge—signaling German reconnaissance planes; the verdict—death, according to the Soviet criminal code's infamous 58th paragraph. A college student had taken a camera along on a walk; the charge—espionage. Others were there on similarly flimsy pretexts.³⁵

Examination of the various Latvian prisons produced numerous instruments, primitive and sophisticated, for torturing prisoners to extract their forced confessions or simply to exercise their power over them. When in June 1941 the Red Army retreated from the Baltic area, on the premises of the NKVD or NKGB (Cheka, later known as KGB) were found a variety of instruments for extorting confessions from the prisoners.

Without enumerating all the devilish devices of torturing, let us mention the ordinary equipment of the working cabinet for interrogation of the NKVD: instruments to break the bones of shins and arms, to squeeze testicles, to pierce the soles of feet and pull off nails and skin from hands, to squeeze the main nose ligament until the victim bleeds profusely, electrical appliances, etc.

The corpses which were left in the courtyards of the NKVD prison and exhumed from mass-graves show that before being shot the “enemies of the people” were mutilated to an extent which in many cases made it quite impossible for relatives to identify the NKVD victims. As a matter of course, the interrogation and sentencing were not carried out publicly, but in great secrecy by special NKVD tribunals.³⁶

Several NKVD lists on death sentences passed in Riga, bearing the signature of Shustin, Commissar of State Security of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic, have survived. These lists usually end with the following resolution: “Considering the social

³⁵ Streips, “Seizure and Destruction,” 189-91.

³⁶ Ilgvars Spilners, historical introduction to *These Names Accuse*, 2nd ed., ed. Ieva Graufelds (Stockholm: Latvian National Foundation, 1982), xxvii-xxviii.

danger they represent, all must be shot.” On some lists, the crimes of the condemned have been formulated in a few words, for instance:

Did not join singing the Internationale on May 1; has fought in the Latvian Army against the Bolsheviks; member of a student fraternity; former policeman; descendant of a kulak [prosperous farmer]; exploited manpower other than his own [a businessman with two or more employees], etc.”³⁷

Mass Deportations to Siberia

Those who were not tortured and shot behind the prison walls, where screams and shots could not be heard, were deported to forced labor camps in Siberia as early as the end of 1940. However, the worst terror of that period of Soviet occupation occurred on the night of June 13-14, 1941, when “acting on a decree formulated as long ago as October 1939, about 16,000 more Latvians were arrested”³⁸ during the first mass deportation to the northern wastelands of Russia in Siberia. On that fateful night, persons in the countryside and the cities of Latvia were suddenly awakened by heavy pounding at their doors. Cheka agents and the Soviet militia rounded up for Siberia innocent victims on their lists. This ominous sound was heard repeatedly in later years. The journalist Ilgvars Spilners tries to knock on the door of our conscience to awaken compassion for those thousands of innocent victims who were led to horrible suffering and death.

Those who did not share their fate should stop for a moment on the sidewalk of history and watch them pass by. Can you feel compassion toward this faceless gray multitude? Or does your compassion arise only when you look at another human face and think—it could have been me,

³⁷ Spilners, historical introduction, xxviii.

³⁸ Streips, “Seizure and Destruction,” 191.

they might have taken me, they might some day take me to march in these lines of prisoners?³⁹

After hearing the announcement for their arrests, the victims received orders to pack their necessities. Then they were loaded into the trucks, together with others of their area. The trucks drove them to the railroad yards, where they were loaded into cattle cars. The doors were shut and their dark journey into the unknown began. Hundreds of trainloads of people from the three Baltic countries and other Soviet satellite republics carried thousands of men, women, and children packed like cattle into the trains, heading east--into Russia. Somewhere along the long journey that lasted several months, husbands were separated from their wives, and children taken away from their mothers. Their destination was still unknown.

Somewhere in the far reaches of Russia, the surviving prisoners were unloaded and separated into boats. The cold rivers Ob, Yenisei, or Lena carried them farther north--to the northern tundra regions of Siberia, even to the Arctic.

On every prisoner's mind were these questions: Why have I been taken like this? Where are they taking me? How shall I survive? Where are my loved ones? Will I ever see them again?

Most of them never met again. Some died by a roadside, frozen to death in a blizzard; others died of starvation, sickness, or exhaustion. Many were shot and then buried in unmarked mass graves of slave labor camps.

.....
16,200 persons were scheduled for deportation from Latvia on June 14, 1941. Only a few managed to escape. In 1940/41 Latvia lost more than 40,000 persons in the terror of Soviet deportations and executions. In later deportations and executions by the Soviets, about four times as many persons were lost to Latvia.⁴⁰

³⁹ Spilners, preface, v.

⁴⁰ Spilners, preface, v-vi.

After the first major general deportation to Siberia, other waves followed. After the brief German offensive, which Hitler pushed through the Baltic States area in the hope of taking Leningrad on Christmas Day of 1941, the Red Army returned to the Baltic area victorious and ever more determined to enslave the native population and to annex the Baltic countries. This Soviet military move was “not an accident in foreign policy, but a carefully prepared and planned action of the Kremlin toward world domination, toward a *pax sovietica*.”⁴¹

Right after the reoccupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union, mass deportations continued even more horribly in 1945 and 1946. An even greater mass deportation was carried out during 1949 and in later years. Let us remember that these brutalities occurred during the Cold War period, when the rest of Europe enjoyed peace.

Altogether, about 600,000 prisoners were taken from the Soviet-occupied Baltic States of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. The numbers can better be grasped proportionately; the number of Baltic prisoners would be equal to a loss of 20 million in the United States or five million in Great Britain.

Many eyewitness stories tell of the fate of groups of Latvians. A group of 2,500 Latvians was deported in 1941 to prison camps in the Perm district, near Chusovoy, Vsesvatska railroad. A survivor of this camp, Roberts Verovs, reported in 1952 there were only 17 Latvians left alive. Voldemārs Krinte tells of Camp No. 11 in Vorkuta where no barracks or tents awaited 1,200 prisoners. A mere wooden sign in a snow bank indicated the camp site—only five prisoners survived. Another survivor of a camp in Kalinin, veterinary doctor Edvards Atrēns testifies that during six months in 1945, at least 50 Latvians died there of starvation and exhaustion. There were 50 prisoner camps in the Usolog-Solikamsk region, Perm district. Each camp

⁴¹ Spilners, historical introduction, xii.

had between 1,000 and 1,500 prisoners. None of the 1,000 prisoners deported there from Latvia on June 14, 1941, survived. All but 17 of the 40 women and children deported to a desolate Yenisei River region of Siberia died in the harsh winter of 1942.⁴²

Young Ruta's suffering in Siberia. Many young and innocent children suffered in the gulag of Siberia. Among them was Ruta Upīte, a fourteen-year-old Latvian girl who was deported twice to Siberia. Anne Frank in Amsterdam kept a diary of her tribulations during the Jewish holocaust.⁴³ Similarly, Ruta Upīte kept a diary of notes. Her manuscript was smuggled out of Soviet-occupied Latvia by American friends of the family in 1967, but published ten years later. The publisher explains the delay in publication.

Before it [the manuscript] could be published, the Cheka learned of its existence. They threatened Ruta's father with reprisals, if it was published. The publication of the manuscript was halted for ten years. Then Ruta's father wrote and asked that it be published regardless of what reprisals were taken against him.

The book was published in its original Latvian language first in 1977 [simply as Ruta U., *Ak Dievs, man vē gribējās dzīvot!* [Oh God, I Wanted to Live] (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Grāmatu Draugs)]. The book is now in its third printing in Latvian, but Mr. U. never saw his daughter's dream come true. He never had the opportunity to see the book, and he died in the summer of 1978.⁴⁴

⁴² Spilners, preface, vii-viii.

⁴³ See M. H. Lewittes, trans. from the Dutch, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952; New York: Globe Book Co., 1958); and in the Latvian language: Cirēne Palkavniece, trans. from the German, *Annas Frankas dienasgrāmata* (Riga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1963) [this book was published in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic by the official state press]. See also Nancy Forest-Flier, trans., *Anne Frank House: A Museum with a Story* (Amsterdam: Anne Frank Stichting, 1992); and Jean Kramer-Updike, trans., *Antisemitism: A History Portrayed* (Amsterdam: Anne Frank Foundation, 1993).

⁴⁴ Grāmatu Draugs, back flap of English translation of Ruta U[pīte], *Dear God, I Wanted to Live!*, trans. Rita Liepa (New York: Grāmatu Draugs, 1979).

The Cheka truck stopped at their summer house outside Riga. The chekists were seeking Ruta's father, but he was not there. Then Ruta was arrested with her two younger sisters, mother, and grandmother on the night of June 14, 1941. She described the conditions in the cattle cars as follows:

Food was not provided. Those who had brought a larger amount, shared it with others. Our thirst was great, but there was no water. . . . Armed chekists guarded the train. At night they tramped through cars calling out the names of those they wanted to find. My father's name was called several times. . . . Riga--Daugavpils--Velikiye--Luki--Rzhev--Moscow--Scherbakov--Yaroslavl--Ivanovo--Gorkiy--Kirov--Molotov--Sverdlovsk--Chelyabinsk--Kurgan--Petrovsk--Omsk--Novosibirsk. . . .

Farther en route we encountered trainloads of prisoners from Lithuania and Estonia. Through the small, barred windows only women and children were visible. . . . Beyond Yaroslavl, for the first time since our deportation we were permitted to leave the train for a while. In a pond nearby we finally were able to wash . . . then on and on again. Many small children perished on the way, unable to endure the miserable conditions. Their bodies were removed and buried near the railroad tracks.⁴⁵

While slaving in the Big Chigas collective farm on Bilin Island, in the Ob River, in the winter of 1943, Ruta saw one-fourth of all Latvians in the group of 200 deportees die of cold and starvation in a period of four months. Her mother and grandmother perished within the first two years. Ruta described her mother and two sisters in these inhuman conditions:

Such a sorry sight they were, those three. So terribly thin, so totally exhausted. Little Maija suffered from a head ailment that the Russians called *zolotucha*, or scrofula. The back of her head was covered by abscesses. Her hair, sticky with pus, was infested by lice and had to be shorn. Dzidra, the eldest of my sisters, had grown extremely skinny. Her whole body was covered by painful suppurating boils. In some spots the road was flooded, so that we had to remove our shoes and wade through. Dzidra suffered the most, because the water, cold against her feet, caused a

⁴⁵ U[pīte], 9-16.

sharp pain. She kept the leg which had the most abscesses, in a bucket, and, while holding the bucket with her hand, she crossed the water.⁴⁶

They tried to survive as best they could. Hunger was their constant companion during their years of working on the kolkhoz, as Ruta recalls:

My friend L. and I sometimes went to the nearby swamp to catch frogs. L. would wade into the pools and capture them, I would kill them with a stick and drop them into my sack. When we had got hold of a dozen or so, we would take the frogs home, skin and clean them and boil them in water with dill. Frogs tasted much like the white meat of chicken. Delicious.⁴⁷

After five years, the teenage girls were released and returned to Latvia. They were arrested again after a few years, and again they were banished to Siberia. Eventually Ruta was alone, slaving on a construction site in Bilin, an island in the Ketya River, deep in the Taiga. There even Ruta's beloved birches could no longer grow. On a meadow near the river, Ruta's brigade was ordered to cut tall grass. When some of them walked to the river to fetch water for tea, they found a dead horse washed ashore. It had become enormously bloated, but the half-starved among them decided to eat it anyway.

Without giving it much thought, they grabbed their knives and carved out the best parts. Cut up in small pieces, the horsemeat was boiled in a kettle. But it was barely cooked when already the famished people tore into it with hands and teeth. Even though I was extremely hungry, I couldn't bring myself to put a piece of this repellent, bluish meat into my mouth. I was nauseated and moved aside. Hunger turns men into beasts.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ U[pīte], 39.

⁴⁷ U[pīte], 40.

⁴⁸ U[pīte]. 55.

In the summer, a two-story building had been built for a fish cannery at the kolkhoz in Bilin. Now the guards wanted the prisoners to build an ice house. They also had to bring chunks of ice on a sled from the pond. "Everything here was done erratically, without any previous planning," Ruta recalls. The Arctic winters were brutal, but the slave work went on.

My job was to water the ice, scooping the water from the barrels and pouring it over the chunks of ice. The pails were heavy, covered with a thick layer of ice. My feet in their worn-out high galoshes kept slipping from under me, and I often fell down. The chilling water from my pail then splashed all over me. My mittens, stitched together from rags, got soaked and froze to the handle of the pail. As I tugged at them, one half stuck to the bucket. I had no more material with which to make new mittens. My feet, all wet, became unbearably cold. Long before noon I was so numb that I had to run into the barracks and rub me feet and my hands with snow, to revive them. They were frozen a bluish red. It took years for this ghastly color to fade. My face, especially my nose, was frostbitten too.

And so it went--day in, day out, from morning to evening.

Resting was out of the question. The brigade leader was supervising us, shouting his orders and scribbling in his notebook. He put down exactly how much and how well each of us had done. If someone was unable to go on and needed to rest, this person was denied the nightly bread portion, which was distributed according to one's output.⁴⁹

When Ruta finally collapsed with exhaustion, she was assigned to work with a grain threshing machine. Despite her hardships, she still was able to admire a beautiful sunset, or the sound of an occasional song, and record these beauties in her diary. For five more years, Ruta worked and suffered in the gulag. In 1956 her sentence was commuted. Alas, by the time she returned to Latvia, her health was destroyed by the slave labor conditions in Siberia, and she died of tuberculosis at the age of 31, a year after her return

⁴⁹ U[pīte], 71-72.

to Latvia.⁵⁰ Her story is like that of thousands of others who suffered the terror of the Soviet regime.

Another victim of deportation to Siberia was a little girl I shall call Vija. As a mature woman with a daughter of her own, she came to visit with one of our parishioners for a brief period.

Vija's grief story: Suffering of children. After the church service, I met with Vija. While everyone was having coffee and refreshments in our social hall, I asked whether she would tell us a little of her experiences in Siberia. She became extremely tense, frightened, and cried almost uncontrollably. After she had calmed down with assurances that there were no spies in the room to report her, she hesitatingly told us a few incidents.

She had been a little girl on that fateful June 14. Her parents were rushing about, trying to find the children's clothing. They could not find her one boot, and she had to leave for Siberia with only one foot covered, the other—bare. With hardly anything to eat, everybody was constantly hungry. Nevertheless, they were mercilessly driven to work, work, work. "We don't need your work. We want your suffering!" the guards screamed at the people when they collapsed in exhaustion.

Vija told us that her relative in America took her to a supermarket here. She had never seen so much food in one place: there were mountains of vegetables, meat, milk and eggs, and tens of isles filled with all kinds of food. And again she cried uncontrollably, because it had reminded her of the time in Siberia when she had been so hungry! By that

⁵⁰ Grāmatu Draugs, front flap of U[pīte].

time all of us were crying, too, and we thanked Vija for sharing her story. We just could not bear to see her suffer any more.

Armed resistance results in more deportations. The brave people in Latvia did not submit without a struggle. Their armed resistance continued until the 1950's without outside help or publicity. The Soviet Government tried to quell their struggle for freedom with new arrests and deportations. Suspected resisters and their supporters were persecuted. The largest mass deportations took place in the late 1940's, and they were used as an instrument to enforce the collectivization of the Latvian farms.⁵¹

While the deported Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians, and people from other countries under Soviet rule suffered in the gulag under Soviet atrocities, the democratic Western world paid scant attention. The Soviet gulag prison camp system was the largest mass extermination of people in the history of mankind; at least thirty million people perished, but no one intervened.

In Kolyma, the far northeastern part of Siberia, where the Soviet need for gold was filled by prison work, there were at times tens of thousands of prisoners gathered in one place for a forced march to a new slave labor camp. They were an expendable and ever-renewable labor source. Among them were thousands of Latvians. The chances of survival were low. From a group of 2,500 Latvian prisoners who arrived in the Kolyma gold mines in 1945, only 500 survivors were released two years later. While a visiting United States vice president and other dignitaries marveled at the magnitude and success of Soviet projects at Kolyma, Lend-Lease tractors were burying masses of dead prisoners on the opposite side of the mountain.⁵²

⁵¹ Spilners, historical introduction, xii.

⁵² Spilners, preface, vii-viii.

A national day of mourning. June 14, 1941, has become a Latvian national day of mourning, honoring all victims who suffered and died in Siberia, following their deportation by the Soviet regime. We observe this day of remembrance at a church service with holy communion, for almost every family has lost fathers, mothers, children, even grandparents and babies--whole families--friends, and neighbors. The year 1941 is known as the "Dreadful Year" (*Baigais gads*). Even worse deportations followed in later years, including those of the Cold War period, when the Western Europe enjoyed peace. This was the holocaust of the Latvian nation.

Most of the victims who survived and eventually returned to Latvia, were broken in body and spirit. Through their horrible experiences, they were traumatized and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). According to Aphrodite Matsakis, "PTSD is a normal reaction to being victimized, abused, or put in a life-threatening situation with few means of escape."⁵³ Matsakis reflects that some survivors report feeling as if they are choking, drowning, or "falling apart." As a person begins to heal, it may seem as if they are getting worse before they get better. Matsakis so correctly suggests that the person with PTSD would need to stop running from the past, and face at least some memories and feelings directly in order to begin the healing process.⁵⁴

According to Matsakis, if the person sees the healing process through, the person will not only regain some sense of well-being and wholeness, but will also gain additional

⁵³ Matsakis, xvii.

⁵⁴ Matsakis, xvi.

strength and empowerment from having survived those experiences.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, such a process of healing was usually denied those who returned to Latvia during the Khrushchev “thaw,” in 1956, for they were often ostracized by the community because officially they were dangerous “nonpersons” with whom people did not dare to get “entangled,” else they might be suspected and deported. Therefore some of these released prisoners willingly returned to a location in Siberia, intermarried with the local Russian population, and remained there for the remainder of their lives, for they did not feel at home in their own native land. These were the realities of the “Evil Empire.”

Even though the two-year interim German period of occupation was not as brutal for the Latvian population as both Soviet periods of occupation, Nazi Germany also had envisioned to put the Latvians in a subservient position to serve the Third Reich.

Nazi Germany's Proposed “Ostland” Colony

After the Soviet Union had attacked Finland in 1939 and had occupied the neutral Baltic States in 1940, Hitler felt threatened by Stalin's expansionist policies and chose to ignore the Nonaggression Pact of 1939 with the Soviet Union. He ordered his army to attack the Soviet Union's borders on June 23, 1941. On the same day they reached the Latvian border, and the entire country was occupied by the German Army by July 7.⁵⁶

Did the Soviets in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania know that an attack was immanent when they conducted the first mass deportations of the leadership of these small

⁵⁵ Matsakis, xvi.

⁵⁶ Laimonis Streips, “World War II in the Baltic Region,” in *Latvia*, 197.

countries on June 14, 1941--just days before the German attack? Undoubtedly, historians will eventually find the answer to that question.

When the Nazi Germans conducted their initial occupation in a civilized manner, the Latvian people joyfully greeted their "liberators" from the terrible Soviet scourge with flowers. Some Latvian partisan groups came out of hiding and liberated several towns, even before the German Army arrived. Some Latvian leaders hoped that Germany would let them restore Latvia's independence; soon, however, German intentions for a *Reichskommissariat Ostland* colony, consisting of the three Baltic States and Byelorussia, became evident. According to Andrejs Plakans, this German colony in the East

was meant to serve as a component part of Third Reich territories in the east at least until the final German victory. Subsequently, according to German plans, most of the Latvian population was to be deported to conquered Russian territory and the Baltic area was to be resettled with farmers from Germany proper.⁵⁷

When some Latvians opposed the occupiers' civilian aims--such as the extermination of Jews, Gypsies, and mental patients--the dreaded Gestapo imprisoned them in concentration camps in Germany or Poland, or the local Salaspils concentration camp. Even my grandmother's compassionate act of throwing bread across the fence to help the starving Jews in the concentration camp at Šķirotava caused her to land behind that fence for several days. The Nazis did not tolerate open protest or any other kind of opposition; however, they let the occupied people keep their flag, sing their national anthem, keep their churches open, and hold their traditional song festivals and other cultural events to keep up morale. They also opened all the closed churches in Russia to

⁵⁷ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 149-50.

appease the Russian population. Then Stalin had to do likewise for a brief period, so that he could win the war over the German Army.

The Latvian Legion

Since 1942 the Germans experienced increasing losses in battle and were forced to make a slow retreat westward. Eventually Latvians could enlist to fight the common enemy, the Soviet Union, but only a small number enlisted. When the situation got worse, the Germans issued a compulsory draft which was an illegal act in any occupied country by decree of The Hague Convention.

All protests by Latvian civil authorities were overruled, and on February 10, 1943, Adolf Hitler signed an order creating the Latvian Legion. Similar legions were created for other occupied countries, such as Estonia, the Netherlands and Norway. While Latvian civil authorities repeatedly requested that the Legion fight only on Latvian soil or on its proximity, this was also ignored by the Germans. However, with few exceptions, Latvian draftees did stay mainly on the Eastern front. Men from the ages of 15 to 37 (older if commissioned officers) were drafted. Altogether some 148,000 Latvians fought on the German side.⁵⁸

It must be noted that while most Latvians were forced to fight, they realized that a defeat of the Soviet Union was imperative to the survival of the Latvian nation. With this in mind, they fought heroically and valiantly.

The Red Terror Returns

When the Red Army returned to the Latvian frontier on July 27, 1944, Latvian military units fought a retreating action, alongside German forces. The Soviet forces occupied Riga, the capital of Latvia, on October 13, 1944. Then the German command

⁵⁸ Streips, "World War II," 201.

ordered all troops to abandon Estonia and to make a last stand in the northwestern part of Kurzeme, which became known as the Fortress of Kurzeme.⁵⁹

The Red Army attacked the Fortress of Kurzeme in six major offensives. In these attacks they lost about 400,000 men. As usual, the Soviet Government did not place any value on human life, especially on the life of its subjugated peoples. From the occupied areas east of the Daugava River, the Soviets drafted Latvian civilians and used them as cannon fodder.

Units of Latvians, drafted in now Soviet-occupied Latvia as well as Red Army prison battalions, were driven ahead of the main fighting forces. These unarmed men were used to absorb opposition fire and to explode hidden land mines.⁶⁰

Latvian Legionnaires, fighting in the Fortress of Kurzeme together with German *Wehrmacht* forces, held their positions for almost a year. When they surrendered on May 8, 1945, which was the day of complete German capitulation to Allied forces, according to Plakans, "an estimated fifty thousand to sixty thousand of these Latvian Legionnaires had been wounded and some four thousand had been killed; twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand were in Allied prisoner-of-war camps."⁶¹ Most Latvian officers captured by the Russians were executed; others were deported to the dreaded Magadan copper mines for what amounted to life sentences.⁶²

⁵⁹ Streips, "World War II," 201.

⁶⁰ Streips, "World War II," 201.

⁶¹ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 152.

⁶² Streips, "World War II," 201.

A good number of the Latvian Legionnaires, seeking refuge, managed to escape by boats to neutral Sweden. However, when pressured by Soviet officials, the Swedish government decided to hand the Legionnaires over to the commander of a waiting Russian warship. The Latvian community in the West was outraged by this Swedish decision, because the Soviets mistreated the former Legionnaires harshly as traitors and shot or deported them to Siberia. Fearing such reprisals, many Latvian Legionnaires had moved from the Fortress of Kurzeme into the woods and, as partisan units, kept attacking their oppressors until 1949; a few of them kept up guerilla fighting as long as 1963.⁶³ Their bravery will long be remembered.

Refugee Flight to the West

Rather than face another oncoming Soviet occupation, some 300,000 Latvians, or 20 percent of the population, chose to leave everything behind and flee to the West during the German period. My parents were among these people. The Latvian refugees fled their homeland until the spring of 1945, leaving behind them everything; some families were separated, and some died on the way or were killed. As Latvian refugees fled the approaching Soviet scourge, some 160,000 Latvian people fled by ship or by land through Poland to Germany--traveling by German warships, cattle cars, horse and wagon, bicycle, or on foot. Another 50,000 were taken to Germany by force. Some 5,000 took the perilous illegal route by fishing boats across the Baltic Sea to Sweden, and several of them drowned or died under military air and naval attacks by the German and Russian forces.

⁶³ Streips, "World War II," 201.

In Germany, the Latvian refugees were used for the war effort in industrial production, while others suffered want and near starvation. All were subjected to nightly bombing attacks from the East and West. The fiercest of these attacks was the phosphorus bombing of Dresden in 1945, but other cities also were leveled to the ground. As the Allied Forces tightened their circle around Germany, Latvian refugees often found themselves in no man's land, and some did not escape Soviet occupation. The following story is about Agate's trauma in the Russian Zone.

Agate's Story of Refugee Trauma

Agate Nesaule, a Latvian pastor's daughter, was only seven years old when she fled with her family from their comfortable parsonage in rural Latvia to avoid the Soviet Russian occupation in 1944. They fled to Germany, where they experienced bombing attacks and were captured by the brutal Soviet Mongolian troops in the Russian sector of Germany. Nesaule still has a vivid picture in her mind of the Russian troops feasting on fish while she and other hungry children were waiting for hours for some leftovers.

The Russian soldiers are mining the lake with hand grenades. They are impatient and angry. Some of them are Mongolians, their eyes are narrow, dark, cruel. When the dying and maimed fish float to the surface, they scoop up only the largest ones. A huge fire is roaring already. They will cook the fish, eat the sweet warm flesh with chunks of dark rye bread. They will drink, shout, sing and dance. The aroma of fish and bread will drift over the hungry children standing behind the barbed wire fence, watching, waiting.⁶⁴

She remembers how she and other children witnessed rape, torture, and executions. They even played with some of the corpses in their "realistic" games in the shed.

⁶⁴ Agate Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile* (New York: Soho Press, 1995), 24.

I continue inspecting and rearranging the baby's tiny limbs. We know he has died of dysentery, typhoid or hunger, like all the others. We do not think about dying of disease ourselves. When I get bored playing with him, we cover the cradle and look around carefully for adults before leaving the shed.⁶⁵

Based on these horrible experiences, Agate published her book, *A Woman in Amber: Healing the trauma of War and Exile*, in 1995--forty years later. It reflects also her story of how she and her family were admitted to a displaced persons camp in the British Zone. After World War II, she immigrated with her family to America, married, and found her way to an American life. In her profoundly moving book, Agate reflects upon the question, "Why tell this story now, so many years after World War II?" This is her answer:

In all wars the shelling eventually stops, most wounds heal, memories fade. But wartime terror is only the beginning of stories. The small boy with arms raised in the face of guns, the girl forced to witness rape, the emaciated children begging for food, if they survive, all have to learn how to live with their terrible knowledge. For more than forty years, my own life was constricted by shame, anger, and guilt. I was saved by the stories of others, therapy, dreams and love. My story shows healing is possible.

Wars are never-ending, and so are their stories. I pray for an end of war, and I fervently hope for greater understanding for all its victims. I want tenderness for them long after atrocities end.⁶⁶

Her story, as seen through the eyes of a war trauma survivor, focuses on the negative long-term effects of war on an individual. Nesaule reflects, as I can also identify in my own family and parishioners, that "No one in my family wants to talk about the war:

⁶⁵ Nesaule, 31.

⁶⁶ Nesaule, viii.

they have many silent images, but they tell no stories.”⁶⁷ She so vividly expressed the thought by writing, “All memories, but especially traumatic ones, are originally wordless.”⁶⁸ Judith Lewis Herman says that “putting them into words inevitably transforms them.”⁶⁹ This coincides with Tim O’Brien’s definition of war stories:

War has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. . . . The vapor sucks you in. You can’t tell where you are, or why you’re there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity. In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.⁷⁰

Nesaule insists that war stories “also test the writer’s integrity and require constant striving for fairness and authenticity.”⁷¹ How could she bring herself to open up, and to whom? One person was her compassionate, gently probing therapist, the other—her loving husband who provided the right intimacy and trust, so necessary for Nesaule to overcome her hesitations. Having married an American from Wisconsin with a different cultural background, she recalls, “During the day I often feel we are strangers. . . . [At night], shielded by shadows, away from the world, in a safe and intimate setting, it is possible to

⁶⁷ Nesaule, vii.

⁶⁸ Nesaule, vii.

⁶⁹ Nesaule, vii, cites Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

⁷⁰ Tim O’Brien, “How to Tell a True War Story,” in *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), cited by Nesaule before “Author’s Note,” vii.

⁷¹ Nesaule, viii.

talk. But later I regret the telling.”⁷² Guilt and shame never quite leave her sense of nakedness after having told one her wartime stories.

At other times, she is tortured by the suffering of other children in other wars. “Faces from photographs of children from Vietnam, Afghanistan, South Africa, Guatemala, Ethiopia haunt me. . . My own experience of war and displacement was different, it was not so bad. How dare I visualize myself like them?” she groans within herself. It is a survivor’s guilt, and also a gratitude that God has spared her from worse trauma.⁷³

Nesaule’s book is relevant to ever more people in the world who are hurt by war. Her moving story is an effort for self-healing and was therapeutic for the writer herself. Other Latvians, like Nesaule, need to tell their stories of their traumatic experiences in the war for their own journeys of healing and wholeness in life, even after fifty years of their war experiences. As painful as remembering the traumatic events may be, I suggest to parishioners that it is not the same as reliving the experience in actuality. Sharing the trauma of the Second World War has been difficult for many parishioners, but through their bravery in sharing their stories in a supportive environment, they have experienced more freedom from their traumatic past.

Through DP Camps to New Lands

After the war, the refugees from various countries were placed in displaced persons camps in the three military zones of the Western Allies. Those Latvians remaining

⁷² Nesaule, 3, 10.

⁷³ Nesaule, 10-11.

in the Soviet sector were either placed in institutional camps, as was Nesaule, or sentenced to long terms in slave labor camps and taken eastward—past their homeland—to Siberia. A few were repatriated under harsh conditions and disgrace; often they were mistrusted or deliberately used as informers.

My parents were both born in Latvia and went into exile during World War II when they were in their early teens. They were sent in cattle cars to Germany, and were in Saxony, when the American troops liberated them before the Russian troops could arrive from the east. How thrilled my mother was to hear these troops calling to each other over their field phones, “The war is over, the war is over!” My grandmother, a widow with four young children, of whom my mother was the oldest, felt secure at last. Unexpectedly, a friendly Russian woman, whose child she was watching during the day, warned her that Saxony and Thuringia will be taken over by the Russians in a few days. Without delay, my grandmother packed up their belongings again and paid a farmer to take her family by horse and wagon to Jena, Thuringia. There they joined with some other Latvians who, just two days later, were being taken by train to Bavaria, in the American sector, and to freedom.

As my father told me, when my grandfather heard the news that the Allies would sacrifice two large regions, Saxony and Thuringia, in exchange for a piece of Berlin, he led a delegation of Latvians to General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s headquarters in Eisenach, trying to convince him not to trust the Soviets and not to give them more land in Europe. The general replied that he understood the situation, but that his “boss” was President Harry S. Truman, who made such decisions. But with his usual bright smile, Eisenhower

asked my grandfather how else he could help him. My grandfather mentioned that four of his eldest children were missing somewhere in northern Germany. Eisenhower immediately assigned a German DKW convertible automobile and a chauffeur to go with my grandfather to the British Zone and find his missing children, which my grandfather did indeed and thus reunited his family.

In the Allied sectors of West Germany, the Latvian immigrants and their families experienced also many hardships. First of all, they were not at all sure where they could live and work in the bombed-out cities, where the Germans themselves had to overcome the ravages of the war and to stabilize the national economy. Eventually, about 97,000 Latvians, who had been dispersed throughout Germany, gathered at Allied refugee centers and were taken by trains to specially designated United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA) camps in the British, French, and American sectors of West Germany.

Unfortunately, these UNRRA officials at first had no understanding of why the refugees adamantly refused to return to their homelands under occupation of one of their Allies, the Soviet Union. They also had no understanding of why some Latvians had fought either on the German or the Russian side in World War II. "Accusations of Nazi sympathies resulted in eviction of veterans from D.P. [displaced persons] camps."⁷⁴

Fortunately, in 1945 the Allied forces realized the desperate situation of the Baltic peoples in exile and issued the following order: "Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians can not be repatriated to the Soviet Union unless they affirmatively claim Soviet citizenship." As Maruta Kārklis correctly concludes, "This order saved most of the Balts from forcible

⁷⁴ Streips, "World War II," 204.

repatriation. Without it there would have been no 'Latvian DP's' and no present-day Latvian community in the U.S.A."⁷⁵

To unite dispersed Latvian families throughout Western Europe, in 1945 a democratically organized group of Latvian leaders, the Latvian Relief Organization, registered about 112,000 Latvians; in 1946 the organization compiled a listing of "American relatives and friends of Latvian displaced persons in Western Germany. This data greatly facilitated the subsequent immigration of Latvian refugees to the U.S.A."⁷⁶

Life in refugee camps after the war bustled with activity. It was a hopeful struggle for a new beginning, for education in foreign languages that would be useful in a new world. In the UNRRA refugee camps, the Latvians organized elementary and secondary schools with a full curriculum, even though few books were available only for teachers. Students survived by taking notes. However, among the dedicated teachers were some outstanding former university professors, poets, and artists. Latvian pastors conducted regular church services, and baptized, confirmed, married, and buried members of their flock. Much appreciated theater groups and other performing artists traveled from camp to camp; choirs and folk dance groups from many camps united in song festivals. Many able-bodied men received jobs, working for the UNRRA. After 1947 these camps were directed by the International Refugee Organization (IRO).⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Maruta Kārklis, Līga Streips, and Laimonis Streips, comps. and eds., *The Latvians in America, 1640-1973: A Chronology and Fact Book*, Ethnic Chronology Series, no. 13 (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications, 1974), 30-31.

⁷⁶ Kārklis et al., 30.

⁷⁷ Streips, "World War II," 203.

By 1947, many Latvian refugees started emigrating to England, then Australia, Canada, and the United States of America. As Kārklis states, the first Latvian immigrants to the U.S.A. came from Sweden in private boats.

The first Latvian World War II refugees crossed the Atlantic Ocean from Sweden to the U.S.A., landing in Florida. Others followed to New England in the *Gundel*, the *Skagen*, and the *Masen*. The arrival of such refugees gained much public attention, and they were referred to as “Latvian pilgrims.” Senator John F. Kennedy supported granting them immigrant status, despite their unusual entry into this country.⁷⁸

The U.S.A. admitted altogether 205,000 refugees—about 45,000 of them were Latvians. Only about 12,000 Latvians remained in Germany, many of them invalids and the ill; a small number also remained in Sweden.⁷⁹ Kārklis made the following observation about Latvian emigration from Latvia:

Conditions in Latvia during the post-World War I period had seldom forced emigration to other countries, . . . during the entire years of Latvian independence (1918-1940), only 666 Latvians emigrated to the U.S.A. Comparing this number with approximately 200,000 Latvians seeking refuge after the Second World War, it is evident that most Latvians left their country only when the occupation government made life at home unbearable.⁸⁰

Most Latvian immigrants got ahead in life in the new lands. In the United States, if they could not speak English, even the older generation professionals took on any menial job, worked hard, learned the English language, learned to deal with a new culture, passed the required examinations, got certification, and were again on their feet. The younger

⁷⁸ Kārklis et al., 30-31.

⁷⁹ Streips, “World War II,” 204.

⁸⁰ Kārklis et al., 32.

generation went to various schools, even schools of higher learning, studied hard, were determined to succeed in their fields of choice, and proved themselves outstanding professionals. They started Latvian newspapers, the American Latvian Association, theater groups, youth groups, the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, professional organizations and fraternal activities, relief organizations, and many other worthy projects.

Events in their new homeland, America, after the war provided fascinating stories too. At that time, Americans stressed the “melting pot” idea and discouraged any former ethnic adherence. The Latvians wanted indeed to become “good Americans,” but there was also that part that claimed a hold on what was from the “old country.” Soon Latvian churches were organized in all major cities and some smaller ones in the U.S.A. to supplement those founded even before World War I by the “Old Latvians”--two in Boston, and one each in Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York. Three or four Latvian churches were founded in Canada. Depending on the availability of Latvian pastors, services were conducted in the Latvian language for liturgy, sermons, and hymns. The Sunday schools taught religion and the language, literature, history, and geography of Latvia.

The Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. John had been founded by a smaller immigrant wave from Latvia at the end of the nineteenth century. Among the founders was my maternal grandmother’s uncle. He sponsored her family from the DP camp near Nuremberg, Germany, in 1949.

My father’s oldest brother had been a very gifted concert violinist, a *Wunderkind*, in his early teens in Riga, where he had been in charge of the Riga Radio Orchestra. He

was sponsored to America with President Truman's help. Consequently, this brother sponsored the rest of the family, including my father. When my Uncle Victors had settled in North Carolina and had founded a chamber orchestra, "Latvian Trio," President Truman had signed a letter, wishing my uncle and his "Latvian Trio" much success "in this great Republic of ours."⁸¹

After the trauma of war came hope for life in the U.S.A., "the promised land." My parents met at an academic fraternity anniversary in New York, married, and my father accepted his first call from a Lutheran church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. My parents were good Latvian Americans; they eagerly adapted themselves to the culture in America, but in many ways, perhaps even unknown to themselves, they kept their old cultural ways and values. My two brothers and I were born in America, but we were affected by our parents' spoken and unspoken story of the Latvian exile from Europe after World War II. As a second-generation Latvian American, I felt their joy and appreciation for living "in this great Republic of ours"; I also felt their subdued pain of their war trauma. Existing in a relational world, their pain and suffering has affected my life in a significant way. At times I even realized that I was thinking and acting like "a European."

There is still much unresolved grief on Latvian Memorial Day of June 14 each year; during the Cold War period, this day was observed only in the free world, but since 1989 it has been observed with silent demonstrations in Latvia. The holocaust of Latvia touched everyone by pulling a family member, close relative, friend, or prominent religious or political leader, including its president, from the midst of a nation.

⁸¹ Harry S. Truman, letter from the White House, 22 July 1953.

Despite Peace, Suffering and Deportations Continue in Latvia

At the end of World War II in 1945, instead of peace, the Latvian people in their native land experienced another occupation by the Soviet Armed Forces. As Plakans notes, the second occupation was worse than the first, because it was more organized and deliberate in its efforts to annex the Baltic province.

The power of the party and of the Soviet Latvian governmental institutions was now reinforced, both practically and psychologically, by the massive presence of the Soviet army. The Baltic Military Region (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Kaliningrad [former Königsberg]), with its headquarters in Riga, was re-created in 1945, raising the number of uniformed persons substantially throughout the country. As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the new political elite consisted of high officials in the party and the government, with the party playing its constitutionally mandated “leading role.”⁸²

More deportations to Siberia followed, especially in 1949 and in later years. What had not been taken out of the country before was pulled out now. During the Cold War, immigrants from other Soviet republics flocked to the occupied Soviet republics along the Baltic Sea, because either they were seeking their higher standard of living or they were sent there to supplant the native Baltic population. Among the native Baltic population, under poor working conditions and lack of medicine and inadequate health care, the death rate continued to rise. Inadequate housing, alcoholism, depression, and many other factors caused the birthrate to plummet. Latvian small farmers and farm workers were driven into collective farms, which were run by Communists. Ordinary people were threatened and coerced into becoming informers for the KGB. The secret police terrorized many Latvian people and spread terror among the population.

⁸² Plakans, *The Latvians*, 153.

Although the storytellers of the Latvian immigrant war experience cannot make the past go away, they do have the power to hope that their memories and scars will diminish over time. The storyteller can also expect that, eventually, through the process of telling and retelling one's trauma story, he or she will be able to share more openly with trusted others. The promises of the healing process will become real over time.

Matsakis reflects from her trauma counseling experience some very real promises of healing. Her promises of healing include, but are not limited to, the following:

- reduced frequency of symptoms
- reduced fear of symptoms
- reduced fear of insanity
- rechanneling of the anger and grief into positive directions
- change from the victim to survivor state
- change from rigidity to flexibility and spontaneity
- increased appreciation of life
- a sense of humor
- profound empathy for others who suffer.⁸³

Integrating these promises as goals for a healthier emotional and spiritual well-being will help the storyteller to find renewed strength of self, others, and a more profound experience of faith in God. This newfound strength will ultimately bring freedom and happiness to one's emotional and spiritual aspects of life. This experience of healing will give the storyteller empowerment and a renewed sense of freedom and responsibility.

⁸³ Matsakis, 236.

CHAPTER 4

Latvia's Way to Independence with Responsibility

Līdz tiem laikiem, Kungs, ko šodien
 Nezin vēl nekur neviens,
 Mūžam brīvs kad latvju ērglis
 Savus spārnus sizdams skries,
 Lai pret nezināmiem laikiem
 Cauri mūžiem ejam mēs,
 Dod mums spēku, dod mums drosmi,
 Dod mums vienprātību, Tēvs.
 Līdz ar savu dēlu sūti
 Jaunu garu tautai šai,
 Lai ta drošiem soļiem spētu
 Soļot pretim mūžībai! Mans Dievs! Mans Dievs! Āmen.
 Leonīds Breikšs.¹

'Til that time, oh Lord, which now
 No one anywhere yet knows,
 When Latvia's eagle, forever free,
 Will take off and spread its wings
 So that against unknown times
 Through the eons we could go,
 Give us strength and give us courage,
 Unity of spirit, God.
 Send us, with your Son together,
 A new spirit to this nation,
 Let us march with fearless steps
 Thus toward eternity! My God! My God! Amen.

When the Latvian composer Bruno Skulte wrote his cantata "Prayer" in 1952, shortly after he had settled in New York City along with many other Latvian refugees, Latvia's freedom from Soviet oppression seemed eons away. Skulte certainly did not expect freedom in his own lifetime. That was the consensus everywhere for the next forty

¹ Leonīds Breikšs, excerpt from "Lūgšana" [Prayer], in *Dziesmu Daugava: Leonīda Breikša dzeju izlase* [Song Daugava: Selected poetry by Leonīds Breikšs], comp. Valda Mora (Minneapolis, Minn.: Sējējs, 1960), 140-41; also composed as a cantata by Bruno Skulte (1952).

years. Despite resignation and acceptance that freedom for Latvia was out of reach, the people continued their constant prayers and undiminished hope against the reality of Soviet might.

On the other hand, since the 1970s the Soviet Union, including Latvia, had become rife with corruption and preferential treatment. Although party membership increased, reasons for joining became increasingly diverse.

They spanned the range, from ideological conviction to sheer opportunism. Those who were not true believers had to live a double life, reiterating party ideas and slogans in public while holding in abeyance views that might be thought unorthodox. For many, such dissembling seemed a small price to pay for benefits party membership brought in status, employment, housing, and material goods such as automobiles.²

The cause for this general attitude was the population's increased knowledge of life beyond the borders of the USSR, gained through improved mass media, increased travel, and several successful cultural exchange programs sponsored by the Western countries, especially the USA.³ This trend by the mid-1970s "had produced a new species of Soviet citizen--the dissident."⁴

² Plakans, *The Latvians*, 163; see also Heinrihs Strods, "Die herrschende Klasse (Nomenklatur) der Lettischen SSR," *Acta Baltica* 28 (1990): 189-98.

³ As an example, the Citizen Exchange Corps, New York City, has conducted very successful cultural exchange programs for professionals and students from American colleges and universities since the mid-sixties. My father actively served as president of the organization's Field Institute, as program chairman, and as Secretary of the Executive Board of Trustees for many years; since 1969 he personally conducted many academic study visits to various cities in the USSR--from Leningrad to the Baltic region to Odessa to Tashkent to Samarkand--spreading knowledge about the American way of life.

⁴ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 164.

In Latvia, even party voices expressed dissatisfaction with seemingly “progressive” production policies, such as collective farming, which was less productive than small individual farming. Overindustrialization caused excessive pollution of the environment without even adequate supply for the population of Latvia, because most of the goods were shipped to Russia. Inefficient planning from Moscow and sloppy production techniques on-site caused much waste in farm and industrial outputs.

Industrial expansion also required recruitment of a larger labor force, resulting in in-migration from other Soviet republics. Giant residential complexes built around Riga proved inadequate; therefore, this virtually non-Latvian in-migrating population had to be settled in older neighborhoods, “ahead of the Latvians who had been waiting for years to move from communal apartments into individual ones. The in-migrant population also had a high turnover rate . . . only a small proportion of those who came and went” stayed permanently in Latvia. “In Riga, the Latvian proportion of the population steadily decreased, from 44.6 percent in 1959 to 40.9 percent in 1970 to 36.5 percent in 1989.”⁵ Of course, the Latvians at home and abroad became increasingly concerned with these negative developments, which threatened to make them a minority in their own native land.

After the deaths of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982, Yuri Andropov in 1984, and Konstantin U. Chernenko in 1985--all of whose leaderships caused a long stagnation period in the Soviet republics--Mikhail S. Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev immediately caused several reforms intended to revitalize the crumbling

⁵ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 166.

Soviet apparatus. The most prominent of them were glasnost, the policy of “openly and frankly discussing economic and political realities,” and perestroika, the policy of “economic and political reform.”⁶ The Latvian Communist leadership also seemed reformist, advocating changes.

Whereas from Moscow’s vantage point, it was a perversion of glasnost and perestroika to cast reform initiatives in *national* terms, to Latvian activists the connection between system reform and the unmet needs of the Latvian *tauta* [people] seemed natural and logical. Thus, in the Baltic ecological protests quickly gave way to national ones.⁷

In the Soviet Union, the nationalities of the republics responded to Gorbachev’s reforms of glasnost and perestroika in various ways. In Latvia, the response was nationalistic. Thus, in 1987, three public demonstrations were tied specifically to political-national history:

On June 13-14 (the dates of the 1941 deportations), the Latvian human rights group Helsinki-86 placed flowers at the Freedom Monument in Riga; on August 23 (the date of the 1939 signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), a large demonstration at the Freedom Monument denounced the pact and suffered numerous beatings by the *milicija* (police); and on November 18 (the date of the 1918 proclamation of Latvian independence), because the Freedom Monument was surrounded by militia and KGB troops, demonstrators placed flowers and candles at other historical sites and in some places posted the crimson and white flag of the interwar republic.⁸

⁶ “Glasnost” and “perestroika,” *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*, 1992 ed.

⁷ Walter C. Clemens, Jr., *Baltic Independence and Russian Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 74-97.

⁸ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 170.

The startling transformations of Eastern Europe, beginning in September 1989 with the opening of the Hungarian border with Austria, followed shortly by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the “velvet revolution” in Czechoslovakia, and silent revolutions in Poland and elsewhere, without interference of Moscow, were encouraging signs for Latvia’s activists to begin thinking of independence.

Gorbachev Resists Baltic Independence

Already on August 23, 1989, Latvian activists and members of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Popular Fronts organized a successful peaceful demonstration to show their unity of purpose.

Perhaps two million people, organized by the Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian Popular Fronts, linked hands in a human chain stretching from Tallinn [to Riga] to Vilnius. This joint action substantially increased the international reputation of the Baltic Popular Fronts and gave the international media the image of a Baltic nonviolent “singing revolution.”⁹

My parents were visiting Riga with a group of students and professionals on the eve of the demonstration and heard the news on a private radio. By night, as their train rolled toward Tallinn, in a small station across the border they passed a parked freight train, loaded with Soviet tanks; the conductor wanted to confiscate a student’s camera, but all ended well. All of them prayed for the brave people of the Baltics. Tallinn was quiet, but in Finland all newspapers carried headlines of the Baltic “human chain.” It was a success also for the events to follow. The leaders of the Popular Fronts of Estonia, Latvia,

⁹ Plakans, 174; Juris Dreifelds, *Latvia in Transition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 72, characterizes the “Baltic Way” as “one of the most impressive demonstrations, widely covered in the West.”

and Lithuania proceeded to formalize a common policy. In this effort, Lithuania led the way to independence.

In the elections to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet in early March--the first multiparty elections in the Soviet Union--candidates supported by the Popular Front (Sajudis) won 98 of 141 seats, and on March 11 the new Supreme Soviet formally voted to restore the Republic of Lithuania.¹⁰

On March 18, 1990, the Supreme Soviet elections in Estonia and Latvia had similar success for the Popular Fronts. In Estonia, the Popular Front's 43 percent was augmented by a coalition with the reform Communists, and less than two weeks after the elections, "the Estonian Supreme Soviet proclaimed de jure the existence of the Republic of Estonia and its current political institution 'in a transition phase toward independence.'"¹¹

Latvian Supreme Council's Vote to Renew the Republic

In Latvia, the Popular Front had the best results--78 percent (134 of 170 seats).¹² However, in April the Latvian Supreme Soviet delayed the move to independence. After a split in the Communist Party occurred in April, "Lenin's statue was removed from the Riga Museum of Revolution, and other statues started disappearing from public places."¹³

By mid-April, Mikhail Gorbachev imposed on Lithuania an economic blockade, especially of oil, and offered the Estonian and Latvian Supreme Soviets "special status

¹⁰ Romuald Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence, 1940-1990*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 331.

¹¹ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 176.

¹² Plakans, *The Latvians*, 176.

¹³ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 177.

within the Soviet Union but threatened economic sanctions if the two countries joined Lithuania on the independence questions.”¹⁴ On May 4, 1990, the Latvian Supreme Council disregarded the threat and “voted to renew the Republic of Latvia, setting an indeterminate transition period to accomplish the withdrawal from the USSR and asking Moscow to form a negotiating committee to discuss the process.”¹⁵ The Supreme Council declared that from now on it would be the highest authority in the Latvian Republic until the final withdrawal from the USSR. Also, on May 4, 1990, the Council declared its justification to demand independence.

The first major decision by the Latvian Supreme Council on May 4 was the reassertion of the claim that the Latvian Constitution of 1922 had never been legally abrogated and had been valid in law or *de jure* right through “to this moment.” The resolution explained the illegal nature of occupation, terror and the anticonstitutional actions of the “Working People’s Bloc” in 1940. The joining of Latvia to the USSR in 1940 could only have been decided by a free referendum which was never held. “As a consequence, the inclusion of the Latvian Republic into the Soviet Union, from the precepts of international law, is not in force and the Latvian Republic still exists *de jure* as a subject of international rights recognized by over fifty nations of the world.”¹⁶

Ten days later, Gorbachev declared the moves toward independence of Estonia and Latvia to be illegal “because they violated the secession clause in the USSR constitution.”¹⁷

However, he did not institute an economic boycott on Estonia and Latvia.

¹⁴ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 177.

¹⁵ Vera Tolz and Melanie Newton, eds., *The USSR in 1990: A Record of Events* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), 205.

¹⁶ Dreifelds, 74-75.

¹⁷ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 177.

Gorbachev's arch-rival, Boris Yeltsin, the newly-elected leader of the Russian Congress of Deputies unexpectedly became their strong ally by initiating direct negotiations with Baltic leaders. As Juris Dreifelds states, "On August 1, 1990, Yeltsin spoke before the Latvian Supreme Council and stressed that 'Russia has taken a stand next to the Baltic States, and the center will have to take this into account.'"¹⁸ The democratic forces in other Soviet republics were growing, and they also "supported the right of the Baltic republics to choose their own future including the choice of sovereignty, and, most importantly, they firmly opposed the use of violence."¹⁹

However, the impasse continued for the rest of 1990 as Gorbachev firmly resisted any compromises. On the other hand, in June, the Citizen's Congress urged the Latvian Supreme Council to be firm in its resolve for Latvia's independence. As time passed, the Council increasingly acted independent of Moscow's directives. To placate rising concerns by opponents to his leadership, Gorbachev tried to reverse some of his reforms by seeking to draft a new union treaty with all Soviet republics. In a "tug of wills," by the October congress, the Popular Front of the Latvian republic again pushed for independence and for the withdrawal of all Soviet troops and Soviet state institutions from Latvia. By November, "more than 90 percent of the Latvian population in Latvia opposed the new Gorbachev-proposed union treaty."²⁰ Latvia was in an especially precarious position, because the Soviet army's Baltic Military District headquarters were in Riga.

¹⁸ Dreifelds, 73.

¹⁹ Dreifelds, 72.

²⁰ Tolz and Newton, 738.

Nevertheless, in November the Latvian Council “instructed municipalities to stop providing supplies and social services to the Soviet army stationed in Latvia”; in December the council “voted to prohibit soldiers of the Soviet army from voting in elections of the country.”²¹ The commander of the Baltic Military District warned the council that such measures could cause extreme repercussions. Moscow by then understood that the various and widespread actions of the Popular Front and the Latvian Supreme Council could only be stopped by a full-scale crackdown.

Only a frontal large-scale military assault could have possibly worked in the short run to neutralize Baltic activism, but this was not an option the Kremlin leadership under Gorbachev wanted to pursue at the time. Many hardliners in Moscow, however, did suggest exactly such a course of action to preserve the empire.²²

Barricades Against Soviet Terror

In January 1991, the Western countries became involved in the Gulf War; therefore, Moscow tried to use this opportunity to harass and possibly to crack down on all three independence-minded Baltic republics.

The crackdown did not materialize, because the general population came out en masse and at least symbolically showed its will to resist with a “now or never” attitude. The Latvian people’s desperate unarmed struggle was broadcast by Western television all

²¹ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 178.

²² Dreifelds, 72.

over the free world via a satellite, and the West condemned the Kremlin for the violence against unarmed civilians.²³

Thus, only special riot militia units, called OMON or Black Berets, of the USSR Ministry of the Interior, caused some violent incidents and seized some government buildings, radio stations, and the press in Riga and Vilnius, Lithuania. On January 13, the Black Berets violently attacked several mass demonstrations in Vilnius, killing 14 people and injuring some 600 others in the crowd.²⁴

The Latvian people still remembered the Soviet crackdown in Prague in 1968. Therefore, to head off a similar attack by the military with tanks, the Latvian Nationalists hurriedly barricaded with heavy equipment and concrete roadblocks several strategic narrow streets in thirteenth-century Riga to protect key government and media buildings.

Some 700,000 persons poured into the streets, forming hastily constructed barricades around the most important public buildings. Continuous civilian patrols lasted for the next three weeks, as skirmishes with the Black Berets continued sporadically throughout the city. . . . Latvians knew that their barricades and patrols offered no realistic obstacle if the Soviet army chose to act with all the means at its disposal. Rather, they symbolized the will to resist, an element, some said, that had been missing in 1940 when the Soviet armed forces moved into Latvia without any noticeable resistance from the Ulmanis government or the general population.²⁵

Young and old people manned the barricades, even without guns, for the next three weeks, despite the bitter cold. Barricades and bonfires were the symbols of those

²³ Dreifelds, 192, cites the *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1991, as saying that “the European Parliament blocked a \$1 billion food aid package for the Soviet Union in response to the January violence in the Baltics.”

²⁴ Dreifelds, 77.

²⁵ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 179.

exciting days. When the Black Berets attacked and invaded the Ministry of Internal Affairs buildings in an attempted putsch of the Latvian National Council, their gunfire killed four people and injured ten others on January 20, 1991. However, the people did not give up their valiant struggle. Among the demonstrators were Latvian and non-Latvian residents. According to Māris Čaklais, editor of *Literatūra un Māksla* (Literature and Art) in Riga, “every fourth person on the barricades defending the inner city against armed intervention was a Russian or a Russian-speaking individual.”²⁶ Even some young Latvian Americans manned the barricades or sent e-mail from the offices of the Latvian Supreme Council. The computer age already previously had opened many new avenues of communication.

The Black Berets remained in the Baltics for several months as a threatening presence; they were never punished for their violence, and neither the Soviet army nor Moscow took any responsibility for their presence; however it was “widely suspected that the republic KGB and the Moscow-oriented rump of the Latvian Communist Party were colluding with the Black Berets or at least supplying them with arms and transportation.”²⁷ These forces took a temporary retreat from their hardline approach, but with their skirmishes “their unpredictable and threatening activities were widely interpreted as a Moscow policy of continuous low-level harassment (some said terrorism) to remind the Latvian government where the real power lay.”²⁸

²⁶ Dreifelds, 78, cites *Literatūra un Māksla*, 26 Jan. 1991.

²⁷ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 180.

²⁸ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 179.

The democratic movements arising in Russia and other republics condemned the attacks on civilians in the Baltic.

The willingness of the Moscow authorities to permit military and police actions in which civilians were killed, wounded or maimed had caused widespread revulsion among the non-Latvian populations in the Baltic and in other republics as well; leading Russian intellectuals, as well as Boris Yeltsin, who was now president of the Russian Federation, had condemned them as a blow against emerging democracy. All this strengthened the independence sentiment.²⁹

During the armed assaults on civilians, Yeltsin critically intervened by admonishing the Soviet military might in the Baltic:

His most critical intervention occurred during the January 1991 armed assaults in Latvia and Lithuania when he called on Russian soldiers not to fire at civilians. He also personally went to Tallinn in the middle of this crisis on January 13, to sign agreements accepting Estonian and Latvian sovereignty and calling for an international conference on the Baltic crisis. Agreements with Lithuania were signed later.³⁰

Gorbachev still pushed for the preservation of the Soviet Union, but Latvian representatives refused to attend Moscow's all-union referendum; meager representation by mostly Russian residents of the Latvian republic on the question of preserving the Soviet Union brought inconclusive results. On the other hand, a Latvian referendum on March 3, 1991, which asked simply "Are you for a democratic and independent Republic of Latvia?" resulted in a surprising 87.57 percent response from Latvian and reform-

²⁹ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 180.

³⁰ Dreifelds, 73; see also Jan Arveds Trapans, "Averting Moscow's Baltic Coup," *Orbis* (Summer 1991): 427-39; for the nature and content of the treaty signed, see Dzintra Bungis, "The Latvian-Russian Treaty or the Vicissitudes of Interstate Relations," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 28 Feb. 1992.

minded Russians, with a 73.68 percent affirmative answer.³¹ The Latvian Communists, under the leadership of Alfrēds Rubiks, and the Russian conservatives of the Interfront and the Salvation Committee warned of dire consequences and advocated “the introduction of presidential rule in Latvia to avert ‘nationalist excesses’ and avoid civil strife.”³²

In April 1991, “Moscow agreed to change Latvia’s name from the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Republic of Latvia.”³³ Despite this concession by Moscow, the Latvian People’s Front and other allied organizations were determined to assure independence by taking one small step at a time.

This strategy entailed the application of constant pressure and the acceptance of limited moves to expand the perimeter of sovereignty without provoking Moscow into a full-scale retaliation or reversal of gains already made.³⁴

Because fifty Western nations had persistently recognized the independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania de jure, the USSR leadership gradually started to treat the Baltic republics as “a special case,” apart from other Soviet republics. The elected Latvian representatives used every opportunity in a Soviet public forum to make other republics aware of the legality of their case. In the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies,

they were able adeptly to represent and argue for greater Baltic political and economic autonomy in a forum which was televised for public viewing throughout the USSR. Being in the center of controversy, these deputies also had many opportunities to explain the Baltic point of view to the

³¹ Dreifelds, 78.

³² Plakans, *The Latvians*, 180.

³³ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 180.

³⁴ Dreifelds, 71.

central Soviet media. One of the major achievements . . . was to initiate the creation of a commission to investigate the details and legality of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 23, 1939.³⁵

Their just cause and example, and that of Eastern Europe, “affected many other regions of the USSR, and together these newly awakened republics with a nascent or refurbished national consciousness were a power that could no longer be contained by existing appeals to empire solidarity and Communist unity.”³⁶

To the consternation of the hardliners, Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost exposed Soviet realities throughout the USSR. The KGB and the Black Berets kept up their harassment tactics, as Dreifelds points out.

The Black Berets became particularly active in the harassment, takeover and demolition of customs posts in all of the Baltic republics. They were also involved in random shootings, kidnaping and murder of citizens. The Red Army, on the other hand, focused its attention on fulfilling the draft quotas which had decreased to 10.9 percent of the theoretical number required for the spring draft in Latvia—compared to a 25.3 percent success rate for the fall draft.³⁷

Realities about the Soviet draft and life in the Soviet Army were largely unknown in the West. Only occasionally were these realities were brought to attention, even to Latvians abroad. One such incident happened to Mārtiņš, a young man of our sister congregation in Riga, in 1984.

³⁵ Dreifelds, 73.

³⁶ Dreifelds, 73.

³⁷ Dreifelds, 78.

Responses to a Latvian Soldier's Suffering

The pastor of our sister congregation in Riga told us the sad story of Mārtiņš. He was drafted into the Red Army and sent to a different republic. When some hardliners in his unit found out that he was a Latvian, they ambushed him in the dark behind an army barrack and violently kicked and beat him so severely that he was completely paralyzed. That happened in 1984. When Mirdza, his mother, found out about her son's severe injuries, she decided to find him and bring him home. Having had nurses' training, she felt she could manage this difficult task.

She arrived in the city of the hospital but was deliberately misguided several times. Finally, one orderly who felt sorry for her told her to go back to the previous hospital, and there she would find him. Mirdza walked through the rows of beds and was appalled at the sight. The soldiers' wounds were bandaged with old newspapers (apparently the army did not have enough bandages), and the blood and pus were seeping through the papers. Finally Mirdza found her son and arranged for his transport back to Riga. Over his bed she mounted a metal bar to help lift him and turn him from side to side every three hours.

Frequently we included Mārtiņš and Mirdza, his mother, in our prayers, and the Ladies' Auxiliary of the congregation immediately decided to send packages of food supplies and clothing to help Mārtiņš. We also supported our sister congregation's other invalids and widowed persons. We also published their letters and notes in our newsletter. Some ladies sent their own individual packages to Mārtiņš. To one of them, this was Mirdza's "thank-you" letter:

I send you my loving and very heartfelt thanks for your large, valuable package. What joy and gratitude we felt upon receiving your shipment, I find hard to express in words! May God repay you for your good deed; we can only gratefully whisper: thank you, thank you. . .

Last week both of us took Communion. For a moment, we felt here at home as if we were at church. The pastor had come with his communion box and had put on even his black cassock. In candlelight he prayed and blessed us and our home. And with gratitude we included you in our prayers.

I believe that you already know that Mārtiņš was crippled while he was serving his draft in the Russian Army ten years ago? His backbone was damaged, and he was completely paralyzed; he can move only his head and somewhat his hands. He can neither eat nor drink by himself. Every three hours I turn him from one side to the other so that he would not get terrible bed sores. Nevertheless, in faith and hope we remain in good cheer. We live just by ourselves, with our cat Rūcis-Pūcis.

But you, dear lady, have "come to visit" with us, for several times a day we remember you when we look at your gifts. Whether it is a cup of hot coffee or hot chocolate, a cube of bullion, a prune or raisin--all of these, after all, have touched your hands; therefore, we have the feeling that you are here, too. . . . May God bless you. May you have good health, and a happy day. We are going to pray for you and your congregation.

Mārtiņš and his mother--Mirdza Cīrule.³⁸

A year later, in 1995, Mārtiņš died. His mother grieved for her only son, then moved to the country north of Riga, near a fishing village, because her parents' small house had been privatized and returned to her. She wrote again to our church member, apologizing for the black despair and depression which she had expressed in previous letters. Mirdza stated that she has accepted her son's death as "God's will." Joyfully she wrote of the fact that, finally, she had fulfilled her son's last wish.

I have to apologize for those letters, filled with black despair, that I have sent to you. Now I am embarrassed that I dared to be so uncontrolled. Excuse me, please! I have come to understand that one cannot do that, that--God does well, whatever He does, no matter how much it hurts. After all, He knows best. . . .

³⁸ Mirdza Cīrule, letter to Olga F., Rīga, 10 Feb. 1994.

After my boy's passing away, I went to live in the country permanently. And I accomplished that which, while the boy was still living, we did not have a chance to do. Since the spring of 1993, we had dreamed about that Cross [sic!]. But it did not materialize. We put aside our project. Also the Rev. Bergmanis [Riga parish] then said very sadly--the congregation does not have any funds for such things. . . .

Thus, two years went by, and we did not accomplish anything. This summer I braced myself and decided to erect the Cross on my own initiative, but I did not have a *santīms* [Latvian cent]! The pastor also could not promise that anyone would do the work, for Riga is rather far away, and the congregation consists mostly of elderly people. And then I went to the fishing village, going from one lonely house to another, and told them of our project. I did not hope for much response. It is no secret: fishermen are no "little quails"; only seldom do they go to church! Rather, they love to take a strong drink, quarrel, and even have a fight! And they swear every day. . . .

However, when something is done in His name, miracles happen: the men were unbelievably responsive. In the woods, they picked out a suitable oak tree, but over the swamp neither a tractor nor a horse could pull it out. The men themselves carried out the oak tree for the Cross on their hands. Six men had to carry the tree, which was almost fifteen feet long and as thick as a telephone pole! One step at a time, they carried the tree for a distance of almost a thousand feet!

After that, we took off the bark and finished it, but did not paint it--left it natural. The branches, too, still can be seen here and there. Then we had the problem of lifting this enormously heavy form "on its feet." We don't have any mechanic means here to do that, but the cross must stand securely to spite all winds and frequent storms from the sea! Even that we accomplished. It was touching to watch how these rough men came together, armed with long-handled forks, ropes, and wire cables. They had put on clean shirts and shaved their stubbly beards, just like on a holy day.

On the next day, April 4, Pastor Rāviņš arrived and blessed the Cross. About forty people had come. On our lonely shore that is a lot! The event was recorded, with a photograph, in the June 11 issue of [Lutheran Church's official journal] *Svētdienas Rīts* [Sunday Morning].

Thus, this Cross stands here as a symbol for faith, peace, and love, beckoning people to good thoughts and deeds [emphasis mine]. But I, in turn, have something to take care of, for a cross, of course, must always be dressed up [with flowers].

Typically Latvian--simple and restrained--the Cross stands on a white sandy hill on the very edge of the sea. In the summer, it was surrounded by gold and pale violet field flowers; in autumn, I had made a wreath of

marigolds and Black-eyed Susans, which bloomed until the frost! But in spring, red tulips and narcissi will blossom out. . . .

On September 28, on the day when a year ago the ferry *Estonia* had sunk at sea, the victims' relatives and friends gathered at our Cross, even from distant regions! They placed flowers, burned candles. They had decided not to drive to Estonia, since we have here our own Cross. They had read about it in the journal.

Only then did I fully understand, that the article in the journal had been necessary, after all, and I stopped grumbling about the correspondent and her article. . . .

But it must be said again that "God knows what He is doing. . . ." ³⁹

As is evident from this rather lengthy letter, the cross had been a great inspiration and comfort for Mārtiņš and Mirdza in their suffering; it gave strength and purpose to Mirdza in her despair and depression; it brought out the best in those rough fishermen as they carried it on their shoulders and set it up on that white sandy hill; and it will keep on giving and comforting as a "symbol for faith, peace and love, beckoning people to good thoughts and deeds" as people from near and far seek direction while they are lost at sea or lost in the sea of life. It was the cross that gave meaning to people in Latvia and abroad in their suffering and hope that one day Latvia would reemerge free and independent.

Latvia Declares Independence on August 21, 1991

On August 19, 1991, happened the unexpected: the Gorbachev Putsch, by its confusion and power struggle in the Kremlin, created an opportunity for the oppressed nations in the Soviet Union to seek freedom. The announcement in Latvia that Soviet Vice President Gennadii Yanaev was assuming the position of acting president of the Soviet Union's Supreme Council immediately, following the arrest of President Mikhail

³⁹ Mirdza Cīrule, letter to Olga F., Icīja, 19 Dec. 1995.

Gorbachev, signaled to Latvian nationalists and hard-line Communists the time of final struggle.

The Latvian Communists, led by Alfrēds Rubiks, got ready for renewed deportations. Thousands of handcuffs were later found at the KGB office for the arrest of nationalists and separatists and, undoubtedly, many Latvian victims of all ages. Rubiks called for the election of a new Soviet Latvian government and declared that he would outlaw all parties, except his own. By the evening of August 19, Soviet tanks and armored vehicles rolled in and took up positions in and around Riga. Soviet troops occupied the Latvian Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Black Berets seized the Latvian radio and television building.⁴⁰

It was a tense situation in Latvia. The prospect of gaining freedom from fifty years of tyranny was on everybody's mind and heart. The Latvian population was clearly outnumbered by thousands of Soviet occupational troops in the country and thousands of Russian immigrants who had settled on its soil in Soviet Russia's intense Russification efforts. Dainis Ivāns, leader of the Nationalists, who was in Stockholm for a meeting, "evidently received instructions to begin forming a government in exile. By August 21, as the coup began to unravel, three persons in Riga had been killed, two by gunfire."⁴¹ Many Latvians prayed at the Monument of Freedom in the center of the city as they had never done before: "God, bless Latvia!"

⁴⁰ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 182.

⁴¹ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 182.

Despite Riga's beleaguered situation, the Latvian Supreme Council was able to respond to the situation. The council amended the May 4, 1990, declaration of independence, announcing that Latvia was an independent sovereign republic whose internal affairs were to be guided by the February 1922 constitution.⁴²

On August 21, Iceland was the first Western country to recognize the Latvian Supreme Council's declaration of Latvia's total independence.⁴³ Others followed shortly. After Gorbachev had returned to Moscow and resumed his position as president of the USSR on August 22, Russia recognized Latvia's independence on August 24.

The Latvian government considered the country's formal relationship with the USSR at an end. On the twenty-fourth, Boris Yeltsin, for the Russian Federation, recognized Latvia's independence. By that date the Latvian government had declared the Communist Party unconstitutional and begun to confiscate the party's offices and properties throughout Latvia."⁴⁴

Alfrēds Rubiks, leader of the Latvian Communists, was arrested on August 27. He was charged with conspiracy, attempting to seize power from the democratically elected government. On August 29, Latvia's government and the USSR's KGB signed a protocol for the liquidation of the Latvian branch of the KGB and for transferring its property.⁴⁵

Latvia had captured this God-given historical moment and had finally become an independent sovereign republic again! In the following week, the independence of Estonia,

⁴² Plakans, *The Latvians*, 182; see also Kārlis Streips, comp., *Fifteen Months That Shook the World: Latvian Crisis Chronology, January 1991 to March 1992* (Rockville, Md.: American Latvian Association, n.d.), 4-7; Tolz and Newton, 565-67, 581; and Andrejs Plakans, "Latvia's Return to Independence," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 22 (1991): 259-65.

⁴³ Dreifelds, 79.

⁴⁴ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 182.

⁴⁵ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 182.

Latvia, and Lithuania was recognized by Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and twelve European nations.⁴⁶ Others followed. Unfortunately, despite urgent phone calls and written appeals by many Latvian Americans, the United States of America was the thirty-fourth nation to do so. Only after the Black Berets had withdrawn from Latvia on August 31, the U.S. Government extended diplomatic de facto recognition to Latvia on September 2. At the end of September, Latvia was accepted as a member into the United Nations.⁴⁷

Throughout the hardships of the fifty years of Soviet occupation, Latvia's original Independence Day on November 18, 1918, has always remained a day of prayer, determination, and hope. The poet Leonīds Breikšs captured the spirit of Latvian history in the following poem, which is also a hymn for worship on Latvia's Independence Day:

Daudz vētru mums reiz pāri gājis
Un ja vēl daudz mums viņu būs,
Dievs aicinās, ka aicinājis
Arvienu atkal saulē mūs.
Caur laiku laikiem Viņš pa pēdām
Tik tāpēc latvju tautai nāk,
Lai reiz pēc posta un pēc bēdām
Tā celtos spēkā varenāk.

Lai tāpēc māte bērnam saka,
Lai dzird no tēva lūpām dēls:
No katras tumsas droša taka
Mūs pretim saulei vedīs vēl!
Mēs varam iet caur visām mokām,
Mēs varam ciest vēl briesmīgāk,

Many storms have passed over us,
And if there shall be many more,
God will call us, as before,
Repeatedly into the sun.
Throughout the years, the reason that
God follows up on Latvia's fate
Is that from misery and grief
The nation shall rise stronger yet.

Let thus a mother tell her child,
Let sons hear from their fathers' lips,
From every darkness a sure path
Will lead again us to the sun!
Thus we can go through any anguish,
And we can suffer even worse,

⁴⁶ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 183.

⁴⁷ Plakans, *The Latvians*, 182-83; Dreifelds, 79.

Jo pacels Dievs uz savām rokām
Mūs tad, kad mūsu diena nāks!⁴⁸

For by God's hands we'll be uplifted
Again, when our day shall come!

I believe that the Latvian religious tradition has embraced both the joyous and the suffering aspects of its culture and has tried to maintain a healthy balance between them in the light of never-ending hope in God's help. Although trauma has existed within the soul of the Latvian people for centuries, healing also exists. The people have been renewed again as they walk through the pain of their past with a new perspective for the future.

The Sense of Religious and National Purpose for Latvians Abroad

Until the regaining of national independence in Latvia on August 21, 1991, the Latvian church communities stressed the preservation and purity of the Latvian language and culture. As the outlook for success in Latvia is gradually improving, the various Latvian-American institutions are also taking a closer look at how to preserve their own continued existence and the welfare of their members here. Although the stress in American Latvian worship services and community activities is still on the Latvian language, services are gradually, though still hesitatingly, becoming bilingual and inclusive to reaching both the American Latvian immigrant population and the second generation American Latvians, with their American spouses and extended families. Unfortunately, this is a belated effort, because many younger Latvian-Americans who were not rooted in the Latvian language have left the Latvian churches and have joined other U.S. churches by

⁴⁸ Leonīds Breikšs, "Daudz vētru mums reiz pāri gājis, . . .," [Many storms have passed over us], in *Dziesmu grāmata latviešiem tēvzemē un svešumā* [Hymnal for Latvians in the fatherland and in foreign countries], ed. by Hymnal Amendment Commission (Pieksāmāki, Finland: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Exile, Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America/Raamattutalo, 1992), No. 519.

now. Therefore, most members of our Latvian parishes are in the sixty-plus age group. With each year, these aging members will need greater pastoral attention and care.

With the freedom of Latvia came joy and, also, unexpected losses. So far, our parishioners had been focused on freeing Latvia. Their vision had been set to the east for the past fifty years. Although all of our Latvian parishioners were elated about the regained freedom for Latvia, many also experienced a secret loss. They experienced existential guilt because they realized that even with the country's freedom, their own dreams of returning to Latvia permanently would never come true. Thus, they felt and expressed to me their guilt of betraying their own dream of returning to Latvia some day. The parishioners who were in their sixties and older had already rooted themselves and their families here in the United States and were happy living here. If they stayed in America, however, after having told everyone that they would go back to a free Latvia, they would be faced with both loss and guilt. They told me that they felt as if they were betraying their homeland by not returning as citizens.

So far, only one parishioner, an elderly widow in her eighties, has returned to Latvia for good. She repaired her father's house and lived there during the first winter without adequate heat, suffering so much that her knee became permanently injured. Now she has told her friends that she made a mistake; she should have stayed here. Since she never became an American citizen, but kept her Latvian citizenship, she can no longer return to the USA. Anyway, it would be too late in life for her to make this major change.

Other parishioners told me that they have lost their vision and purpose, now that Latvia is again free! What dreams did they have to look forward to? After some uneasy

months, the members realized that they could still do a lot for Latvia by sending care packages of clothing, Bibles, money, and other humanitarian relief, as they have done for years, and also by becoming more involved with helping their old communities in Latvia.

One of the greatest experiences that came with the freedom in Latvia was that now the Latvian parishioners here feel more free to talk about their grief experiences of the war. After the Berlin Wall collapsed and the Iron Curtain fell, my parishioners no longer had to fear the Communist system, especially since they had been living in the U.S. for about forty years. Now they share their stories more freely. Thus, regaining of freedom in Latvia has also had a great and positive impact on the freedom of our parishioners' souls—they are more free to tell their stories!

Humanitarian Aid and Support to Latvia

The main stress in the Latvian churches and political, academic, and other societies still remains that of giving humanitarian aid to Latvia: churches, orphanages, schools, hospitals, invalid homes and individuals, especially pensioners, are in great need. As in any time of turmoil, much corruption can be found in the present government and various businesses; some previous Soviet Latvian leaders on urban and rural councils remain in their old positions and govern in the “old ways” in a now democratic country; the Mafia collects “protection money” from private enterprises in cities and even small towns; laws are on the books, but they are not enforced; officials take bribes, especially in import/export situations, and thus imports exceed exports, and the economy remains weak. Furthermore, some support money given through western loans has mysteriously disappeared without ever reaching the people; some banks owned or co-owned by Russian

nationals have declared insolvency after making questionable investments in Russian banking deals. Many other problems also need urgent correction.

In the midst of the transitions, most of Latvians in 1993 still did not want to give up their independence and return to former Soviet rule, whereas about two thirds of the Russian population, containing many retired Soviet army officers and their families, clearly stated their loyalty to Russia. However, looking ahead for the next five years, a majority in both groups expected an improvement in the Latvian government.

There is an overall commitment by people to adhere to democratic norms. Nevertheless, polling studies in the fall of 1993 revealed certain equivocations about democracy. Both major language groups acknowledged overwhelmingly that the current democratic system was better than the communist system in allowing for freedom of speech, group association, religion, travel and emigration abroad, and choice of political parties. At the same time, about a third of Latvians and two-thirds of Russian--speakers gave a positive rating to the system of government before independence when Latvia was a part of the Soviet Union. Balancing this is the very positive view by both groups of the expected system of government in five years: 81 percent of Latvians and 71 percent of Russophones felt that the presumably democratic systems of the future will be to their liking.⁴⁹

Each year many Russian citizens are choosing to return to Russia. Therefore, in spite of all the present transitional difficulties, the general situation in Latvia is improving. Much credit must be given to Latvian determination, and the constructive advice and personal assistance willingly given by concerned Latvian and other Western specialists from abroad, who are reaching ears and hearts in Latvia. For instance, several American Latvians and Western financial experts from Sweden and the USA are helping to stabilize Latvia's banks, and thus the Latvian currency, the *lats*, remains strong. A few years ago,

⁴⁹ Dreifelds, 176.

the roads and highways in Latvia, because of long neglect, were declared to be among the worst in the world. Recently the government levied a gasoline tax for repairing badly damaged highways of the country and streets in the capital, Riga. In addition, the Latvian Lutheran Church in America and some of its congregations are giving money for scholarships to gifted theology graduates in Latvia for their postgraduate studies in the U.S. In a few years, they will reinforce the Theology Faculty of the University of Latvia and help to educate new pastors. Until then, several of our American Latvian pastors and professors fill the void caused by the closing of all theological education in Latvia during the years of occupation.

Building New Lives Abroad

As a pastor of a Latvian parish, I hear the story of the Latvian journey from my parishioners who have immigrated to the U.S.A. I also hear the stories of the second generation Latvian Americans about how they are processing their experiences of growing up in their immigrant families in the U.S.A. Some of these people in their twenties and thirties are very nationalistic; they have been dubbed *superlettiņi* (Superlatvians) even by the Latvian community. Many of them have already moved to Latvia to live there permanently. They actively participate in responsible political, banking, and commercial positions. Several of them have lived in Latvia since the crucial weeks of January 1991. Others here of the second generation have made a 180-degree turn and have completely left the Latvian community when they intermarried with other cultures. It is very difficult to bring them back into the Latvian community.

At church and during home and nursing home visitations, my elderly parishioners tell me stories of war experiences and journeys to the U.S. In the retelling of their stories, our elderly parishioners experience healing and a greater wholeness of the Self. Many elderly parishioners have for years repressed their painful experiences due to fear of further persecution. When our parish first published a membership list with telephone numbers and home addresses (for members only), many elderly members were visibly upset. They quickly confiscated any loose copies, fearing they could fall into the “wrong hands.” The younger generation accepted such a list quite calmly. The same situation with membership address lists happened also in other Latvian parishes in the U.S.A.

I encourage my parishioners to share their grief experiences, though this sharing may be painful for them. I believe that there is healing in the telling of their story, though it may be like walking “through the valley of the shadow of death.” It is painful, and tears come to their eyes as they share.

In the telling of their stories and in the hearing of their stories Christ is present. Healing and transformation of the Self and the community occur in the process. Usually the elderly parishioners organize their stories around both world wars and the exodus from their homeland.

The stories of my parishioners communicate much suffering, but also their spiritual journeys. Their spiritual gratitude stems from how they have felt the presence of God at a particularly difficult time. When they put their faith and trust in God, they gained the spiritual strength needed to convince themselves that they would survive the war. After World War II and through their bare existence amid the ruins, they suddenly saw hope and

had faith that God would bring them to a place of peace and safety in a new land. Thus, in the telling of their story I believe that Christ, through the divine nature, is active. When I make follow-up visits, some parishioners tell me the same story again, but in greater depth. In the process, I do sense an emotional and spiritual healing since our previous visit.

For the Latvian community, Christ is known through the Word and experienced in the retelling of His story. Christ is also known through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. My parishioners understand that Baptism is “membership into the Christian community and seal of the promise of eternal life.” The sacrament of Holy Communion is very holy and significant for the Latvian community, because during Holy Communion the story of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection is retold. Christ’s story is either consciously or unconsciously identified with the Latvian story of grief and suffering. Christ’s presence makes the Holy Communion service reverent and sacred, as the Latvian people with great empathy experience Christ’s story of suffering. In the remembering is the process of healing toward transformation and wholeness.

In hearing their story and integrating my own story within the Latvian community, I am enabled to write or tell our Latvian story to other people of different communities. Through Christ, the transformational power of God for humanity is experienced. When my parishioners walk through their grief, they are transformed spiritually. Thus, the integration of the process of grief truly parallels their spiritual journey toward healing and wholeness in life.

The religious purpose of Latvian pastors abroad, therefore, must be to encourage their parishioners to share their grief stories with them. They should also encourage their parishioners to share their experiences with their trusted friends, for it is by learning not only to tell our stories to one another, but also to listen to one another, that we discover our shared humanity. Through the process of sharing our stories, I believe, we find the ultimate meaning within our souls and a means to connect intimately with others. As particular parishioners can deal with their root grief issues, they also are better able to deal with their present grief situations. This issue brings to mind the grief story of a parishioner I will call Anna, who was unable to cope with her present grief situation.

Anna's Grief Story: Freedom from Suffering

Anna called one day, saying that she wanted to talk with me. When her husband Jānis was still alive, he had been active on Church Council and in the choir, but Anna had always stayed in the background; being quiet and shy, she only minimally got involved in the Women's Auxiliary. After Jānis had passed away, she seemed to withdraw even more. She and their son Vilis sat together quietly in church services and then left immediately. She always had the mark of sadness and suffering on her face, and she seemed to have no energy.

When I visited her, she haltingly explained that she was very unhappy with her life. Except caring for Vilis, life had no real meaning for her. After some probing, Anna blamed her problems today on what happened in the past, during the war. As she angrily told me, the Soviet occupation of Latvia had been very harsh. Stalin and later leaders ordered the deportation of thousands to Siberia—just because they owned a farm or store, had served

in Latvia's armed forces, were patriots, or were religious leaders. The remaining Latvians were assigned to work on collective farms or in factories; they were second-rate citizens beside a hostile, privileged group of Soviet immigrants. Russian immigrants of the working class also suffered, for freight cars constantly took food and manufactured goods out of the country to supply Motherland Russia at the expense of its colonies. That is when Anna lost their first child, who died at the age of two because of malnutrition and lack of medicine.

When the German army invaded Latvia and pushed out the Russian troops, many Latvians decided to leave their homeland and flee westward before another Russian onslaught would bring more misery to them. Among this throng of refugees were Jānis and Anna, who was expecting another child. In Germany they had to move from place to place, as the Allies closed in from east and west. In Germany, their second child, a girl, was born, but she died from a fever when she was only four weeks old. After the war, the family was given refuge in a camp for displaced persons. It was a time of rest and hope. In war-torn Europe, there were no jobs for refugees. They longed to find a land that had not suffered the ravages of war.

Anna and her husband were accepted for immigration to America. They settled in Pennsylvania, got work, and he became active in our Latvian church. Life was full of hope and dreams again. Anna told me that their third child, a son whom they called Vilis, was born, went to school, later also to college. Now he was working. That is when her story ended abruptly. I tried to find out why she sighed, but she told me that she could not forget her children who died in the war.

After her husband died, Anna became increasingly withdrawn, frail, inattentive and ill. She watched other people being active and happy, but there was a constant shadow over her life that she was unable to overcome. On her eightieth birthday, her son invited the entire choir over to their home in the country for a catered dinner and birthday party. He loved his mother so much and would do anything for her. They were very close. Though he was somewhat slow and seemed to have difficulty speaking, he was generally a likable fellow.

Only when Anna had passed away, did I, quite by accident, learn of the secret that she had harbored and had tried to hide for many years: Anna's troubles and depression had only got worse when their only surviving child Vilis received a head injury in an accident. His operation was unsuccessful. He was unable to continue his studies and had to find a job. He was actually lucky to be given a desk job in a prison. Thus, when Anna's husband died of cancer, Anna was left alone with their invalid son. She had always tried to encourage Vilis, but just looking at him and his difficulty to function made her severely depressed. Her husky son drove her to church services, but after the service she wanted to leave immediately. Instead of sharing her burden and overcoming her grief and depression, she became increasingly withdrawn, frail, inattentive and ill. Perhaps she deteriorated out of denial, perhaps in her limited way she hoped that by sacrificing her own happiness she could protect her son from danger and give him a better chance in life.

Last year she passed away. Her story lives on in the hearts of her family and friends as a woman who survived the war and immigration experience, but who became free from emotional and spiritual suffering only in death.

Like Anna, each person has a unique emotional and spiritual life, and thus a unique feeling pattern will emerge within the process of working through grief and loss during the sharing of one's story. Many of these feelings are common to everyone who experiences loss in his or her life. Most of us are living through grief or are grieving through life much of the time. Life is made of small and significant daily losses. Along with grief we can discover joy and healing that come from moving through our pain into renewed zest for life. Our natural state of being human involves both the grieving process and the healing process that come through the awareness and changes in life. Paradoxically, discovering the meaning of loss in grief is as important as the healing.

Through the process of healing from our grief and loss in life we begin to feel connected with ourselves through a feeling of wholeness. We connect with ourselves and with others through the process of healing. As we begin to heal, we in turn impact and affect others around us. As we heal from our grief and loss, God in turn is affected and God heals along with us. We are living in a relational world. As we experience the process of moving through our suffering, pain, and losses into healing and wholeness, often others within our communities and elsewhere and God are impacted, too, and experience healing and wholeness along with us.

Anna, like many other Latvian immigrants who experienced the trauma of the war, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), ranging from mild to moderate to severe. Freedom from PTSD can be attained through the process of walking through the pain and suffering of the traumatic past, or at least the symptoms can be lessened. The next section will deal with PTSD and its process of healing.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is classified as an anxiety disorder. In the DSM-IV it is characterized by the re-experiencing of an extremely traumatic event accompanied by symptoms of increased arousal and by avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma.⁵⁰ PTSD's diagnostic criteria, listed in the DSM-IV as 309.81, is reflected in many of my parishioners who have been through the trauma of the war. The purpose of this section is to explore the complexities of PTSD and its effects in one person's life.

Diagnostic Criteria

According to the DSM-IV, four sets of diagnostic criteria can be identified, having to do PTSD. PTSD occurs in mild, moderate, and severe levels when a person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following characteristics were present. Thus, the first criterion, Criterion A, reflects upon a person experiencing the initiating traumatic event.

Criterion A:

- (1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and
- (2) the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.⁵¹

Unfortunately, PTSD, left unattended, can consume much energy from an individual and can be draining both emotionally and spiritually.

⁵⁰ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV*, eds. Michael B. First et al., 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: APA, 1994), 393.

⁵¹ *DSM-IV*, 427-28.

Several of my parishioners suffering from PTSD reflect depression, substance abuse (alcoholism or abuse of prescription medication) and compulsive behaviors such as eating disorders or compulsive gambling. A person suffering from PTSD seeks out a substance or activity to create a false sense of temporary relief and help from internal pain and turmoil. Unfortunately, they also suffer with feelings of self-blame, survivor guilt, and low self-esteem. Trauma can affect the way a person views their world and their self-image. Often parishioners share feelings of anger and depression around their grief stories. For parishioners to identify the source of their anger and depression can be healing, however. Thus, walking with parishioners through their experiences of grief can bring healing and wholeness to their lives.

According to Matsakis, people with post-traumatic stress disorder experience healing when they get more in touch with their feelings and understand the link between what they feel and think surrounding the traumatic event in their life. The traumatic event with people who suffer from PTSD, as reflected in DSM-IV, in Criterion B is persistently re-experienced in one or more of the following ways:

Criterion B:

- (1) recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions.
- (2) recurrent distressing dreams of the event.
- (3) acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring (includes a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those that occur on awakening or when intoxicated).
- (4) intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.

(5) physiological reactivity on exposure to internal cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.⁵²

PTSD under Criterion B is a stress reaction due to one's experience of trauma. It can create a host of short-term readjustment problems. According to Matsakis, "Two recent studies found that whereas many war veterans evidenced stress reactions to the war, they were, nevertheless, psychologically healthy."⁵³ Although PTSD symptoms existed throughout the centuries of wars, the psychiatric casualty rate was extremely high in World War II. Matsakis states, "After World War II, military experts concluded that the trauma of war was often enough to impair even the 'strongest' and 'toughest' of men!"⁵⁴ She also reflects that "Most World War I and II veterans who suffered from PTSD kept their problems to themselves or drowned them in alcohol. As a result, numerous World War II and Korean War veterans still suffer from nightmares and other symptoms of PTSD."⁵⁵

Criterion C, listed in the section on PTSD in the DSM-IV, describes the symptoms of PTSD as a persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma and a numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma), as indicated by three (or more) of the following:

⁵² *DSM-IV*, 428.

⁵³ Matsakis, 325.

⁵⁴ Matsakis, 325.

⁵⁵ Matsakis, 325.

Criterion C:

- (1) the efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
- (2) efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
- (3) inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
- (4) markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities
- (5) feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
- (6) restricted range of affect (e.g., unable to have loving feelings)
- (7) sense of a foreshortened future (e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span).⁵⁶

Survivor guilt is very central to PTSD. According to Matsakis, survivor guilt used to be considered one of the formal criteria for diagnosing the disorder of PTSD. Matsakis states, "Survivor guilt was removed from the formal criteria, not because it isn't prevalent among trauma survivors, but because it was not seen as being essential to the numbing, re-experiencing cycle of PTSD."⁵⁷ Matsakis reflects so correctly that in her many years of work as a therapist with traumatized veterans, "I have yet to meet a veteran who, while grateful to be alive, is not also overflowing with guilt at having lived while others of his comrades died."⁵⁸

Many of my parishioners who have lived through traumatic World War II have similar survivor guilt feelings about relatives and friends who have died in the war. Matsakis reflects that a veteran of war can have survivor guilt even if the individual does not feel responsible in any way for the deaths of other soldiers. She states,

⁵⁶ *DSM-IV*, 428.

⁵⁷ Matsakis, 330.

⁵⁸ Matsakis, 330.

Your survivor guilt will be especially strong if you feel some act of cowardice, aggression, or incompetence on your part contributed to the death of one of your fellow combatants. . . . It is okay to feel sad about someone having died in a traumatic situation, but it is not rational or appropriate to feel total responsibility for that person's death.⁵⁹

Matsakis reflects that the war should be blamed, not those who lived through it!⁶⁰

Sharing one's grief and war story will help the war survivor to begin releasing and getting in touch with his or her feelings of anger, depression, or guilt. However, as important as this is, many, like Anna, are not able to talk about their grief. They become locked in their grief process.

Theologically, one can say that God is present in the telling and listening of one's grief story. God touches both the teller and listener with grace that helps both of them through the story. Telling one's story within a family setting of others who experienced the war, or within a grief group, can also help the individual to feel more support in telling his or her story.

Criterion D in diagnosing PTSD relates to the persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma), as indicated by two (or more) of the following:

Criterion D:

- (1) difficulty falling asleep
- (2) irritability or outbursts of anger
- (3) difficulty concentrating
- (4) hypervigilance
- (5) exaggerated startle response⁶¹

⁵⁹ Matsakis, 330.

⁶⁰ Matsakis, 330.

⁶¹ *DSM-IV*, 428.

The diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder under Criterion E states that the duration of the disturbance (Symptoms in criteria B, C, and D) is more than one month.⁶² Acute symptoms reflect symptoms of less than three months, and chronic symptoms are more than three months. "Delayed Onset" symptoms reflect symptoms of at least six months after the stressor.⁶³ Criterion F states that "the disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning."⁶⁴ The DSM-IV is an extremely helpful diagnostic tool for describing the characteristics of PTSD.

In our society today, triggers of the war experience exist constantly for many people. Beyond the fact that wars of all sorts are going on nearly continually in our world, the war theme is also common in popular films and television programs. Often the trigger of watching a film on war can bring up PTSD for a war survivor. Many Latvian survivors change television stations when they see a clip about a war. These parishioners find that conscious or unconscious triggers to the war experience are painful for them. Some other triggers of war feelings are the anniversary of the death of a family member or friend; encounters with strangers; loud noises from helicopters and planes overhead, fireworks on the Fourth of July, fire engine or ambulance sirens; or even certain foods eaten during or after the war (pea soup). At times parishioners will share their pain of the war if a trigger has set them off and they are experiencing emotional and spiritual pain.

⁶² *DSM-IV*, 429.

⁶³ *DSM-IV*, 429.

⁶⁴ *DSM-IV*, 429.

“War . . . is all hell,” stated General Sherman, but the hell of war does not need to continue throughout one’s life.⁶⁵ Through the sharing of one’s grief story and through the process of healing, an individual will acquire a greater understanding of how the war experiences of the past affected him or her present life. Through sharing one’s grief story, an individual will also become aware of new feelings and thoughts, and find constructive ways to reinterpret his or her experiences from the traumatic war days. Whether the trauma was experienced by a soldier in combat, by a frightened child in a displaced persons camp, by a mother or father worrying about food for the family’s survival, or by a pastor concerned for the emotional and spiritual lives of the congregation—healing and wholeness can be experienced through the sharing of one’s grief story.

In the case of a parishioner whom I will name Teodors, the sharing of his war trauma and a recent similar situation made him aware of his lingering PTSD.

Teodors’ PTSD and War Experiences

I was visiting with Teodors one day. In the middle of our discussion, we were interrupted by the shrill sound of the fire engines racing down the street. Teodors shuddered as he remembered the sirens of World War II. I asked him whether he remembered any specific incident from that time.

That is all the prodding Teodors needed to tell me of his air raid experience. When he had been just ten years old, in February 1945, he and his three younger brothers and sisters and parents, having left Latvia as refugees, were going through Dresden on their westward way. The sirens began to wail. As usual, people were leaving the streets and

⁶⁵ Matsakis, 337.

running into public bomb shelters. Soon they heard numerous explosions above them. Each time a bomb exploded nearby, they could feel the ground trembling. They realized that this was a major attack on the city of Dresden and were happy to be in a safe place. Then there was a major crash and rumble right above them: the building above the shelter collapsed on top of them! Then they were in silence and darkness. Everyone realized that they were buried alive under the rubble.

Teodors' mother and father, both religious people, totally trusted in God's guidance in their lives. They comforted the children that God would help them to get out. Though they were scared like everyone else, they told their children how God had led the children of Israel out of Egypt across the Red Sea, and how the Lord Jesus had brought Lazarus forth from the tomb. "God will help us!", they repeated over and over. His mother prayed more fervently than ever before. Then all of them held hands and prayed together.

They recited the Twenty-third Psalm, and especially the phrase of "the valley of the shadow of death" seemed very real, as well as "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." His mother kept praying for a miracle. They waited, and waited—it seemed like eternity, one day after another. Waiting and not being able to do anything was so hard. At first some people had screamed until they were hoarse, then they, too, calmed down and waited. A few people had a nervous breakdown, others were in shock and did not move at all. All of them tried to conserve oxygen by moving as little as possible. There was no more food left, and hardly any drinking water. After about four days, suddenly someone

thought he heard a noise. People tensed, hoped, got excited that the wait may be over.

Then the sounds became more distinct: yes, they were digging us out!

Slowly, step by step, the crew of rescue workers came closer to the people in the shelter. One by one, they were pulled out and were blinded by the bright sunshine above ground. What a nightmare it had been! When they looked all around, they realized that the real nightmare was above ground: phosphorus bombs had leveled most buildings of the city and had burned most people alive who had not managed to find shelter underground. With tears streaming down his face, Teodors recalled his miracle of God that they had been kept safe through the days of hell. Truly, God had led them through the valley of the shadow of death into the house of the Lord, which is God's creation. Teodors looked at the members of his family and rejoiced that all of them were well. Then he noticed that his father's hair had turned completely white over the tribulation of the last four days.

For Teodors, the Dresden experience became a turning point in his life. He was so grateful to God that he became very spiritual and helpful to others in all aspects of his life. Teodors and his family came to the U.S., where he studied hard and became very successful in his profession.

Teodors did not realize that he still suffered from PTSD after so many years. With a group of tourists, he visited Israel to walk in the steps where the Lord had walked. In Jerusalem, the group visited the German Lutheran Church in the Arab section. It was a bright, sunny day. The pastor encouraged them to climb up the bell tower "to see a magnificent view of all Jerusalem." Teodors and several others slowly climbed the winding stairs of the steep tower—higher and higher. Suddenly, Teodors had a panic attack. He

felt he could not breathe right, that everything was caving in around him. A strange thought occurred to him that, after having been all over the world, he would have to die here, in Jerusalem. He was covered with cold sweat. After a while, he regained enough control of himself to descend, by going backwards one step at a time, until he reached the ground level. He was at a loss to explain what had happened to him in the tower.

When Teodors shared this experience with me, he stated that he had felt very uncomfortable in tight spaces several times before this incident, but that he had tried to dismiss it. Now he realized that tight spaces evoked the memory of those four days when he had been buried alive, and perhaps subconsciously he feared that next time he would not be so lucky.

According to Matsakis, secondary wounding experiences may continue to influence the way a person reacts to “triggers”—those individuals, places, or life situations that remind the person of traumatic experiences of the past. Matsakis states, “Triggers can cause extreme reactions: numbing, rage, panic or anxiety reactions, additions, nightmares, and other PTSD and psychological symptoms.”⁶⁶ Coping with these PTSD triggers, according to Matsakis, is one of the most troubling aspects of being a trauma survivor.⁶⁷ Grieving for most people is an emotionally challenging process, and most people avoid it until they have an experience where it becomes obvious to them and they are forced to deal with their uncomfortable feelings.

⁶⁶ Matsakis, 2.

⁶⁷ Matsakis, 3.

Teodors and I talked about his anxiety-producing experience of feeling cramped in the narrow staircase and what that experience might have reminded him of during his war experiences as a child. After sharing with me some of his war experiences, Teodors made a connection between his war experiences and his anxiety in the church tower. He also shared other experiences of feeling claustrophobic. He had never realized that these various experiences could be traced to his traumatic experience of having been buried alive in the shelter for several days. Teodors felt a sense of healing that day as he shared his war story with me. Throughout the story, Teodors repeatedly stressed that he and his family had prayed to God for help and that even in moments of despair they had faith that God would answer their prayer.

Faith is not an experience in isolation. It is relational within the community. We are all relational creatures, and our faith is either supported or unsupported within the relationships of our family, friends, and community. Because his faith was nourished by relationships, hopefully Teodors will begin to share his faith story about Dresden with others and will begin to feel more connected and whole through this experience. In the sharing, Teodors may experience more healing in his life and gain a greater understanding and perspective of himself while wrestling with his post-traumatic stress. Working through his grief from the war has been rewarding for Teodors. As with any other form of trauma, recovery from PTSD does not mean the total disappearance of symptoms, but rather a reduction in their frequency and intensity.

CHAPTER 5

The Stages and Process of Loss and Grief

PTSD has been characterized as a problem of unwept tears or unresolved grief, and the grieving is perhaps the hardest part of the healing process. Indeed, grieving and coping with losses are among the most difficult aspects of human existence. Emotionally, grieving is such a challenge that most people, both trauma survivors and others, tend to avoid it at all costs.¹

When a person has experienced loss and is grieving, they often feel a pain of engulfment, vulnerability, feelings of defenselessness, and an overwhelming experience of weakness. As most of us at one time or another in life have experienced this feeling, it hurts and feels like you are dying inside. To heal from the loss, grieving is the process that a person walks through at his or her own pace to integrate the experience of loss into their being and experience wholeness again. Grieving is one of the most difficult challenges in life. However, the journey through grief and loss brings healing and has significant emotional and spiritual benefits.

Unfortunately, unresolved grief has been a factor in the development and perpetuation of a wide range of psychological problems including misplaced anger or outbursts of rage, restlessness, depression, addiction, compulsion, anxiety ranging from mild to severe, and panic disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder.² According to Matsakis, unresolved grief has also been implicated in the development or worsening of medical problems such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, cancer, asthma, and a

¹ Matsakis, 195.

² Matsakis, 196.

variety of allergies, rashes, and aches and pains.³ The benefits of grieving including the lessening of PTSD symptoms, improved physical symptoms, and, ultimately--emotional and spiritual freedom. Grieving a particular loss such as the death of a loved one or the loss of a homeland due to the war helps an individual to move on to new involvements emotionally and psychologically. This does not mean that the grief experience will be forgotten; rather, it will be integrated as part of one's story. Having worked through the experience of loss will lessen the pain of the experience and help the individual to share his or her story within their community as a part of themselves. Through the community, more healing will hopefully occur as the individual tells his or her story and, hopefully, either consciously or unconsciously, helps others within the community to heal from loss and grief.

The process of telling one's story affects both the teller and the listener. The process of telling one's grief story of the war perhaps embraces the paradox between experiencing powerlessness and empowerment. It involves both the pain of silence and the healing power of self-expression. The pastoral counseling relationship gives the parishioner the courage and grace to face memories of a painful past, perhaps a painful lost childhood, and other experiences of grief and loss in a comfortable setting. Trust and intimacy occur during the pastoral relationship, which helps the process of healing and wholeness to begin and to proceed. The process of healing is often a slow, gradual process of learning how to share one's story. It is a process of beginning to care for the self in a new and different way through repairing the loss of self-esteem and of trust in others. In

³ Matsakis, 196.

the company of the compassion, understanding, and inner strength of a pastor, a parishioner can begin the process of healing. In the process, faith and grace are integral parts of healing and wholeness.

Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, in their book *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*, state that two things are essential in understanding grief: "that we understand grief in relationship to community and that we be sure that God will not abandon us in our grief."⁴ They cite Walter Brueggemann as having suggested that it is the covenant which provides the context for grief and loss, in which life is characterized by faithful hearing and speaking.

It is in the covenant community that we experience the bearing of sorrow. The purpose of the "lament forms" of the Bible was to "enable and require sufferers in the community to experience their suffering in a legitimate life-world. It is this form which enhances experience and brings it to articulation and also limits the experience of suffering, so that it can be received and coped with according to the perspectives, perceptions, and resources of the community."⁵

Brueggemann declares, "The question about God which grief raises is not God's power or goodness but God's faithfulness." In the covenant community, for the grieving person it is possible to address God directly.

To address God directly even in anger is an act of confidence that one's sorrow and suffering have not driven God away. Loss and grief are real in human life and equally real in the presence of a faithful God. No amount of pain and suffering can separate us from the God who suffers with us. The

⁴ Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 170.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 263-75, cited in Mitchell and Anderson, 170.

life, death, and resurrection of Jesus affirm to us that God is not apathetic, but a faithful listener who suffers our pain with us.⁶

Mitchell and Anderson conclude that “those who grieve are most likely to believe that God has heard their pain and has been touched by it if they experience the presence of those who are willing to suffer with them.”⁷

Howard Clinebell, in his book *Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness*, reflects the growth of an individual as a unified process. He reflects that growth does not occur in isolation, but within the community. He states,

It should be clear that there is no such thing as isolated ‘self-fulfillment’ or ‘self-actualization.’ Genuine self-actualization always involves self-transcendence! Authentic fulfillment results from participating in a process of self-other fulfillment self-society, and self-environment fulfillment. It is important for the counselor to be aware that the potentialities of persons are not just within them but are in their total situation. All dimensions of their lives and their particular cultural and historical setting offer resources and limitations to their growth.⁸

Growth within community has occurred gradually within my Latvian Lutheran Church, as reflected in the freedom for people to begin integrating into their local secular communities and moving beyond their fears of connecting with people beyond their own community. On occasion, an opportunity arises for a pastoral counselor to involve not only one but several parishioners in the process of sharing their grief stories in the community of faith.

⁶ Brueggemann, cited in Mitchell and Anderson, 170.

⁷ Mitchell and Anderson, 170-71.

⁸ Howard Clinebell, *Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness: A Hope-Centered Approach* (New York: Haworth Press, 1995), 19.

Grieving in the Community

Olga's grief story, in particular, emphasizes this point that, when one person shares his or her grief story and another sympathetic person with similar experiences listens, the opportunity presents itself for both of them to share their burden of grief and experience release from their repressed feelings of trauma.

Olga's Grief Story

Such an experience occurred in my ministry, which reaffirmed the truth that walking through our grief process with others is healing for the individual and others within the community. One of my homebound parishioners, whom I have visited regularly for pastoral counseling, experienced a traumatic journey from Latvia to Poland during World War II. The parishioner, whom I will call Olga, is eighty-seven years old. Three years ago, when I asked her to share her story with me, tears welled up in her eyes, and she resisted, saying it would be too painful to do so. After several pastoral counseling visits with her, she felt more trusting to share her story that she had kept as a dark and hidden memory over the past fifty years. As a result, Olga experienced freedom in releasing the pain of her past.

Olga's war story dealt with her family's journey on horseback through the backwoods of Latvia and Poland, and with bombings in 1945. She shared with me her fear, pain, anger, and depression about the ravaged land. Her eyewitness account of Latvian civilians riding their horses into the Baltic Sea and drowning with their horses in their futile escape from the pursuing Russian soldiers was quite emotional. One of the most painful moments of her life was when she witnessed her sister's three-month-old

baby die from starvation and sickness in her sister's arms, somewhere in the forest in Poland! Olga's story of torture, violence, pain, and suffering is sacred. She told me this story in confidence, and I kept it close to my heart and mind in confidence. Although she kept this story private, Olga seemed to experience healing through the sharing of this story.

A year after she had told me her story, with many pastoral counseling visits between, Olga and I were having lunch with another parishioner, Elza. Suddenly, Olga began sharing her war experiences, but in a much lighter tone and mood than she had a year before. I was surprised and was wondering what would happen next. As Olga shared her story, she encouraged Elza to do the same.

After a few moments into our lunch conversation, Elza began to share her experiences of traveling by ship from Latvia to Germany. As Elza shared her story about being seasick while expecting her first child and while the Soviets were trying to bomb the ship, I realized Elza's helplessness and trauma in that war experience. All of us felt a sense of sacredness around the lunch table. Elza then shared with us her great hunger during the war. Also, she shared about the loss and death of her brother, who was killed in battle.

While sharing her story with the encouragement of Olga's story, Elza confessed that she had tried to forget the war and that she did not feel permission all these years to share her story. That day, over lunch, a new bond formed among the three of us.

That special day over lunch, both Olga and Elza identified their losses and continued to grieve their losses of innocence and childhood: the trauma of the bombing attacks, their suffering, family deaths--as seen through their eyes as young teenagers. They

also grieved over the loss of their homeland, their powerlessness as victims of the war, and their status of displaced persons in Poland and Germany. They spoke of their experiences of doubt and faith through their Christian understanding. There were other losses which they either consciously or unconsciously recognized. Thus, more healing occurred within the community over lunch than had surfaced for several years. I was also touched and personally moved through this experience. Our lives were enriched with the telling of the grief stories. Both Olga and Elza reflected upon the fact that their faith in God had carried them through the ravages of war.

Other parishioners have similar grief stories, yet each is unique and is seen from a personal perspective. The common bond, as particularly stressed in most cases, is the importance of faith in God in situations of life and death. Faith in God gave them the ability to face hardships, even doubts, and grief. Faith in God helped them to survive, because faith in God gave them hope.

Grieving in the Community of Faith

As in Teodors' story in the previous chapter, and in Olga's and Elza's here, the faith of one's family and community are often critical in the midst of trauma and in the grieving process. Professor Granger Westberg, who holds a joint professorship in preventive medicine and religion at the University of Chicago and at the University Illinois College of Medicine, states in his book *Good Grief* that faith plays a major role in grief of any kind. Westberg reflects that faith plays a major role in the grief process, but not in the way some people think. He states,

They often seem to have the idea that a person with strong faith does not grieve and is above this sort of thing. Moreover, these people imply that religious faith advocates stoicism. They might even quote the two words from Scripture, "Grieve not!" They forget to quote the rest of the phrase in which these two words are found: "Grieve not as those who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13).⁹

In both the First and New Testaments, grief is seen as a normal experience and as potentially creative. Westberg reflects that there are healthy and unhealthy ways to grieve. What an individual considers being most important in life will definitely affect the way he or she grieves.¹⁰

The theme of Westberg's book *Good Grief* is to explore "good" and healthy aspects of grief. His main focus is that we can learn from the patterns of our own grief. Living in a mobile country, Westberg also uniquely focuses on the grief of having to move to another city, which is connected with the loss of emotional connections and relationships. He states, "The uprooted family is cut off from stabilizing relationships in the community which every child and adult needs so much."¹¹ Living in a relational world within communities, our faith can be sustained and nourished within our secular and religious communities. Faith—as an aspect of community expression or, to use an image from building, the cement that holds the bricks together—is an integral part of being and feeling a part of the community. As significant as faith is to connecting to God, the self, and others, faith is significant to the healing process of loss and grief.

⁹ Granger E. Westberg, *Good Grief: A Constructive Approach to the Problem of Loss* (1962; reprint, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 10.

¹⁰ Westberg, 11.

¹¹ Westberg, 13.

Reflecting back to the stories of Olga and Elza, their faith was deepened and became an integral part of their grief story and their connection to God, themselves, and to others within their community. As present as God is within our communities, God is also in the midst of Olga's and Elza's grief stories. God is not only in the midst of feeling the pain of their stories, but also in moments of feeling happiness and freedom in their stories.

The Process of Grieving

Grief stories take on a certain pattern as the individual walks through various stages of grief. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, the world-renown grief therapist, explains that the grieving process consists of five stages: denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance. Individuals who experience loss in life due to the death of a loved one or grief due to war usually experience these five stages of grief in the order listed above. At times an individual can move from anger to depression and back to anger again. These stages, as represented by Kübler-Ross, are flexible and can, for example, be reflected in an individual over several days to several years. A person can also be in more than one stage at a time. It depends upon the person and his or her pace of recovery and healing how their grief is expressed. Common to most individuals' grieving, feelings of fear, despair, disorganization, guilt, and anxiety may accompany the grieving process. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will reflect upon Kübler-Ross' five stages as related to the grieving process and to the stories of my Latvian immigrant parishioners. Unfortunately, some parishioners have become locked in one of the five stages and have not moved to other stages of grief. Others have moved through all the stages of grief and experienced much healing as a result.

Denial within the Grief Process

God has made us that we can somehow bear pain and sorrow and even tragedy. However, when the sorrow is overwhelming, we are sometimes temporarily anesthetized in response to a tragic experience. We are grateful for this temporary anesthesia, for it keeps us from having to face grim reality all at once. This shock stage—or perhaps it should be called counter shock—may last anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours to a few days.¹²

Dynamics of denial. An individual experiencing the first stage of grief, denial, might reply to loss, grief, and trauma by saying, “No, not me!”; “No, I don’t see the connection”; or “The diagnosis is wrong. I’ll get another opinion!” Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross states in her book *On Death and Dying*, “Denial, at least partial denial, is used by almost all patients, not only during the first stages of illness or following confrontation, but also later on from time to time.”¹³ Denial, according to Kübler-Ross, functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself or herself and, with time, mobilize other, less radical defenses. This does not mean, however, that the same patient will not later be willing, or even be happy and relieved, if he or she can sit and talk with someone about his own impending death.¹⁴ Denial is usually a temporary defense and will soon be replaced by partial acceptance. However, when denial becomes a permanent defense from the grief, loss, or trauma, then problems for the individual can

¹² Westberg, 21.

¹³ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, Collier Books, 1969), 35.

¹⁴ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 35.

occur. One such example is reflected in a pastoral counseling visit that I made last year with one of my parishioners whom I will call Marta.

Marta's grief story: Denial. Marta came to me after the worship service in tears that her son was going to get married and that she was having a hard time letting him go. For a parent, plans for a wedding normally bring both happy and sad feelings. However, for Marta this was an experience of extreme sadness, because her son had lived with the parents for forty-two years of his life. Both of their older children had been married for many years, and even some of their children have already married; however, Marta could not let go of her youngest son. He had dated his fiancé for eight years. I watched Marta grieve the loss of her son, who would be living with his new wife just five miles from the parents' home after the wedding. One Sunday afternoon I planned to meet with Marta for tea and talk about the grief of her son. While she shared her grief story about losing her son, other issues emerged. Marta had suffered a great loss with the death of her father, who was drafted into the Russian Army during World War II and never returned home alive. While growing up, she had been very close to her father. Unfortunately, due to the trauma of war, his body was never sent back to his family, and there was never a funeral or memorial service held for him.

As a result, Marta never really grieved the loss of her father, and secretly she wished he would return alive to her one day. Unconsciously, Marta's holding to her son seemed related to her failure to grieve the loss of her father. She did not want to lose any other people whom she loved. During the first few pastoral counseling sessions, Marta denied that there was any connection between the loss of her father and the loss of her

son. However, after a few weeks she could see the connection and begin the process of grieving the loss of her father. Through becoming aware of her loss and grief over her father who passed away some fifty years ago, Marta was then able to begin the grief process about her son. Marta had moved out of the denial stage of grief and could move into the other stages of grief. As she began healing, she could accept her son's situation and let him also move on with his life and his happiness.

Marta is a great example of how sharing one's immediate grief story can help overcome previous grief. Through the telling of her story, and through a suggestive pastoral approach, she could experience healing and more freedom in her life. Today Marta appears happier. Although she still misses her son, she is happy for him because he is happy in his new marriage. She is also happy with all of the social gatherings with the new wealthy in-laws and lets everyone in church know about it. From a pastoral perspective, being patient and supportive with someone during their denial stage is helpful.

Anger within the Grief Process

For many of us, the indignation stage will be the most difficult stage of all, because it forces us to get in touch with the anger that our painful past experiences generate—anger that we have worked overtime to keep underground ever since we were hurt. Getting in touch with and working through that anger is an absolutely essential step in the healing process. But it is also very scary and extremely confusing, providing yet another breeding ground for internal conflict and emotional turmoil.¹⁵

¹⁵ Sidney B. Simon and Suzanne Simon, *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace with Your Past and Get on with Your Life* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 149.

Dynamics of anger. According to Simon and Simon, by feeling that anger from the past now, by coming to understand the other's often more threatening emotions hidden behind it, and by finally expressing it in a healthy manner, we clear the way to solving the problems that we buried along with it.¹⁶ Feeling anger is neither good nor bad, according to Simon and Simon; it is a rather natural reaction that occurs whenever self-esteem or pride is hurt or threatened.¹⁷ Anger also provides the energy an individual needs to protect oneself from those threats or to escape them. When anger is used constructively, however, it can prompt an individual to take action to stop or counteract whatever is hurting him or her.¹⁸

Anger is a normal and healthy part of the grieving process. In his book *Good Grief*, Westberg reflects that anger is to be expected. It is to be wrestled with, and it can, by the grace of God, be overcome.¹⁹

An individual experiencing anger, the second stage of grief, might reply by saying, "Why me? Why not? Everyone's mean and insensitive! They really don't care about me!" If a person is dying and is experiencing anger, this person might cry out, "My family just wants me out of the way!" or "I'm still here! Don't forget that!" According to Kübler-Ross, in her book *On Death and Dying*, "When the first stage of denial cannot be

¹⁶ Simon and Simon, 149.

¹⁷ Simon and Simon, 151.

¹⁸ Simon and Simon, 151.

¹⁹ Westberg, 51.

maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment.”²⁰

According to Kübler-Ross, anger, in contrast to the stage of denial, is very difficult to cope with from the perspective of the family or the medical staff. “The reason for this is the fact that anger is displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random.”²¹ Anger is often expressed as blame at another person or institution, or self-blame. Kübler-Ross, working from a medical field, reflects upon the concept that anger does not last long when an individual experiences respect and understanding: “A patient who is respected and understood, who is given attention and a little time, will soon lower his voice and reduce his angry demand. He will know that he is a valuable human being, is cared for, and is allowed to function at the highest possible level as long as he can.”²² The tragedy is perhaps that we do not think of the reasons for a patient’s anger and take it personally, when it has originally nothing or little to do with the people who become the target of the anger.²³

Often the emotion of guilt is connected with the emotion of anger. Normal guilt is the guilt we feel when we have done something or neglected to do something for which we ought, by the standards of society, to feel guilty. Neurotic guilt is feeling guilty to an unrealistic proportion about our own real involvement with a particular problem.

Westberg reflects that it would be hard to conceive of any of us, who had lived closely

²⁰ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 44.

²¹ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 44.

²² Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 46.

²³ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 46.

with a departed one, not to feel guilty about some of the things we did or did not do for this person when he or she was alive and was with us.²⁴

Guilt alienates a person from himself, others, and God. Westberg states that “unresolved guilt and misunderstood emotions of this type can make us miserable for years, or they might come out in a variety of physical symptoms of distress.”²⁵ Westberg suggests that it is important for us to face both our normal guilt along with our neurotic guilt that we suffer. He also suggests that we must not be afraid or embarrassed to talk about our feelings of guilt with those who have been trained to help us when we need their help.²⁶

Erna's grief story: Anger. Erna, a ninety-year-old Latvian immigrant parishioner, just recently told me her story about her war experiences. She explained that her parents were killed in the war. On their way to Siberia, her brother and his wife were separated. Soon thereafter her brother died. Her sister-in-law endured somewhat longer in the harsh Siberian winter. Then Erna's older sister, Velta, who was working as a medical doctor in Latvia, was also deported to Siberia. The night a Soviet officer came to Velta's house with the deportation notice, she grabbed a few necessities and also wanted to take her M.D. diploma from the desk drawer, but then she changed her mind, because the officer was sitting right in front of her desk drawer. She could not bear the thought of going near him. Thus, she abandoned the idea and left without her diploma.

²⁴ Westberg, 46-47.

²⁵ Westberg, 49.

²⁶ Westberg, 49.

In Krasnoyarsk Erna's older sister Velta was assigned to work in the woods as a lumberjack. When the authorities found out that she was a medical doctor, they tried to persuade her to work as a doctor for the Russian population in town. Velta told them that she did not bring her diploma, for a doctor's work meant she would be paid even less. She needed every kopek to make ends meet. Upon their insistence, Velta finally agreed, for she saw the great need of the people. When she found out about the deaths of her brother and sister-in-law, Velta asked the authorities to let her take care of their two children, else they would be sent to an orphanage in Siberia. The authorities argued the case, but finally agreed.

Erna was left behind in Latvia with her younger sister Mirdza. Both decided to flee westward before the Soviets returned in 1944. They survived the end of the war in Germany, then were lucky to get visas to the U.S. and settled near Philadelphia, Pa. Both of them worked, then Mirdza became ill. For twenty years she was in a wheelchair, and Erna took care of her on their meager pension. They saved as much as they possibly could and lived those years without even a telephone, radio, or newspaper, so that they could send some money and care packages to their sister Velta and their brother's children in Siberia. When they finally were permitted to return to Latvia during Khrushchev's reign in 1959, Erna gladly sacrificed even more for them who were in great need. Despite her grief and anger over the innocent suffering of her family members, Erna did everything in her power to help them. Finally Mirdza died, and Erna was left alone. With her last savings, Erna helped pay for Velta's plane ticket, so that she could come for a visit and attend the funeral. They came to church a few times, then Velta went back to Latvia.

Erna still kept sending money and packages. Then she received the news that Velta had died. Erna was too old and frail to attend the funeral in Latvia, and she also could not afford the expense. Her health markedly deteriorated, and she was placed in a nearby nursing home, where I could visit her more often.

We have talked about her war experiences several times. On a particular visit, I noticed how angry Erna had become. She was angry with the Communists, because they had killed or enslaved many of her family members and relatives in Siberia. She was angry about the loss of her young adulthood due to the war, about the loss of her dreams. She was experiencing the stage of anger within her grief process. She was also angry because she felt alone in the nursing home and had few visitors. Now that her sister was dead, she hardly ever got any news from Latvia. Her brother's children had grown up, had married, and had their own lives. They no longer bothered even to write to her. She seemed flooded with anger and wondered why God had given her such hardships in life.

It seems that what triggered Erna's anger after all these years of work and sacrifice was the incident that occurred when her older sister Velta, who had been in Siberia all those long years, came to the United States for a short visit. Velta was asked to speak about her Siberia experiences at the local college. At first Velta had agreed to do so, but then, on the day of the speaking appointment, fear and paranoia set in. She backed out. She told Erna she was afraid the former Soviet KGB might hear her speak of her Siberian experiences, arrest her, and deport her to Siberia again. Therefore Velta immediately rescheduled her flight and went back to Latvia! Velta's sudden and unexpected behavior made Erna extremely angry. She told me: "Was it not enough that the Soviets killed my

parents, my brother and sister-in-law, and many friends? Now I see how my sister Velta has been affected and emotionally damaged by the Soviets that she so abruptly left me!" Erna was angry about the emotional and spiritual scars that the Communist system and the war had left on her loved ones.

Erna had moved out of the numb stage of denial into anger. Although her anger might have turned people away from her, I knew that her anger reflected her sister's situation and paradoxically affected her healing process. For the first time Erna expressed such deep feelings of anger! I knew not to be alarmed, but I hoped that she could move along her process of grief. After several weeks her anger calmed down. She accepted Velta's fear and had compassion for her.

As her pastor, I asked Erna whether she had ever been angry at God! She told me that she had always felt God's presence, but during these few weeks of anger she had felt that God had abandoned her! She had felt intense feelings of anger at God and had cried out, "Why has God done this to me? Why has God done this to Velta?"

Erna's story in the nursing home suddenly reminded me of Ivan's angry feelings, as portrayed by Leo Tolstoy in his moving story, "The Death of Ivan Ilych." Justice Ivan Ilych, successful in the Russian court and seemingly successful in his private life, at the age of forty contracts a painful, incurable disease and is dying. Everyone around him is in denial of his death, except Ivan Ilych himself. In his pain, as he lies in his bed helplessly and the young peasant-servant Gerasim is the only one caring for him, Ivan Ilych experiences anger, injustice, and loneliness from the community and from God.

He [Ivan Ilych] only waited till Gerasim had gone into the next room and then restrained himself no longer but wept like a child. He wept on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God.

"Why hast Thou done all this? Why hast Thou brought me here? Why, why dost Thou torment me so terribly?"

He did not expect an answer and yet wept because there was no answer and could be none. The pain again grew more acute, but he did not stir and did not call. He said to himself: "Go on! Strike me! But what is it for? What have I done to Thee? What is it for?"

Then he grew quiet and not only ceased weeping but even held his breath and became all attention. It was as though he were listening not to an audible voice but to the voice of his soul, to the current of thoughts arising within him.

"What is it you want?" was the first clear conception capable of expression in words, that he heard.

"What do you want? What do you want?" he repeated to himself.

"What do I want? To live and not to suffer," he answered.

And again he listened with such concentrated attention that even his pain did not distract him.

"To live? How?" asked his inner voice.

"Why, to live as I used to—well and pleasantly."

"As you lived before, well and pleasantly?" the voice repeated.

And in imagination he began to recall the best moments of his pleasant life. But strange to say, none of those best moments of his pleasant life now seemed at all what they had then seemed—none of them except the first recollections of childhood. . . . As soon as the period began which had produced the present Ivan Ilych, all that had then seemed joys now melted before his sight and turned into something trivial and often nasty.²⁷

Only after Ivan Ilych has verbalized his desires—to live as he used to, well and pleasantly—he suddenly realizes that it has not been such a "good life" after all. He suddenly realizes that his life has had no meaning: He has been married for convenience to the wrong woman, with whom he does not have real rapport; he has distanced himself from his two children; and he has spent his free time playing cards with people who were

²⁷ Leo Tolstoy, *"The Death of Ivan Ilych" and Other Stories*, trans. with an afterword by David Magarshack (New York: New American Library, Signet Books, 1960), 146-47.

not really his friends. Now he wishes he could change his life and redeem himself with a more meaningful life in the future. Alas, it is too late!

Anger during grieving can be experienced in many different ways. Erna was angry about having been victimized by others; Ivan Ilych at first was angry at others for having deserted him, but then he turned the anger against himself. It is amazing how well Leo Tolstoy understood human nature and the struggles of the heart already in the nineteenth century!

Bargaining within the Grief Stage

The third stage of grief, according to Kübler-Ross, is the stage of bargaining. She states that bargaining is really an attempt to postpone.

Dynamics of bargaining. Bargaining has to include a prize offered “for good behavior.” It also sets a self-imposed “deadline” (e.g., one more performance), and it includes an implicit promise that the patient will not ask for more if this one postponement is granted.²⁸ A dying patient in the hospital may try to bargain with God for more time and for less pain. A person in the bargaining stage of grief may say, “Let me do it just one more time and I’ll . . .” or “Maybe God will listen if I ask nicely . . .” or “I’ll be good, . . .” or “I promise. . . .” By offering support and encouragement to someone during the bargaining stage, a counselor can be helpful in working with the person through his or her grief work.

Nora, one of my parishioners, was in the bargaining stage of her grief process during one of our pastoral counseling sessions. Nora expressed feelings of emptiness,

²⁸ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 73.

sorrow, loneliness, and uncertainty in her life. I was empathetic with Nora as she expressed feelings of what might have been.

Nora's grief story: Bargaining. Nora has chosen to share with me her immigrant experience. During World War II she had fled Latvia. Her family had left their farm in the countryside of Latvia when she was twenty-three years old. She got married to Jānis, another Latvian refugee, while they traveled through Germany, and they had a son who died due to inadequate food and medicine. Nora was traumatized over this event. Their son was cremated, and she carried his ashes to America with them. Her husband, Jānis, died ten years later of cancer, and she kept also his cremated ashes in a box next to her son's ashes in her bedroom.

Nora told me during one of our pastoral counseling sessions that she often talked over her problems with her dead husband and son for comfort because she had placed their photographs next to the ashes. Nora lives alone in her little house in a wooded area on top of a hill. She is very isolated and often does not leave the house for weeks. She was more active in church when her husband was still alive. She keeps in touch occasionally with some of her Latvian friends over the telephone. Occasionally her daughters visit her or take her down to the city for a week. Whenever I am in the area, I visit with her, and she has appreciated these visits.

On one visit, Nora was sharing with me her traumatic war experience when her baby son died. She reflected an excessive and almost irrational self-blame about the death of her son, saying "If only I had done this or that . . . perhaps my son would not have died!" I supported Nora through her bargaining stage without judgment, with a listening

ear. On our next visit, she had dropped the self-blaming and “if only . . .” statements. Instead, she reflected how important in her life was her faith in God, and how much more meaningful her relationship with God has become! She even showed me some of her own religious poetry that she had adapted to the tunes of some well-known hymn melodies.

Westberg reflects that faith in God will not be taken away from a person who is in the grieving process. He states,

At the time of great loss, people who have a mature faith give evidence of an uncommon relationship with God. And they demonstrate an uncommon inner sense of strength and poise which grows out of their confidence that such a relationship with God can never be taken away from them.²⁹

He reflects that a person with this faith in God can usually face any earthly loss with the knowledge that he or she has not lost everything. Westberg explains: “They still have God on whom to rely. I have come to see that this way of looking at life makes an amazing difference in the quality of the grief experience. It actually can become good grief!”³⁰

Depression within the Grieving Process

What is depression? Everyone has “the blues” from time to time, and when it happens, we often say we’re depressed. There is a difference, however, between those feeling a biochemical or clinical depression. Depression is part of the grieving process. However, the depression that is part of the five stages of grief . . . does not constitute true clinical depression. Normal grief is a response to a real external loss—that of a loved one, a pet, or a home, car, or other valued object—that is consciously recognized.³¹

²⁹ Westberg, 63.

³⁰ Westberg, 63.

³¹ Matsakis, 35.

An individual experiencing the fourth stage of grief, depression, can no longer deny the loss and his or her numbness or stoicism. His or her anger and rage will soon be replaced with a sense of great loss, according to Kübler-Ross.³² She reflects that if a person is allowed to express his or her sorrow, the person will find the final grief stage of acceptance much easier. The person will be grateful to those who can sit with him or her without constantly telling the person not to be sad.³³

Dynamics of depression. Depression as reflected by sadness and a great sense of loss is a painful and yet significant part of the process of grief. Although depression associated with the grieving process is temporary, it can still be experienced as intense and painful. Depression is a natural response to loss and stress in life.

Within the normal grieving process, depression lessens over time—even though it may sometimes take many years. In contrast, clinical depression is a sadness that grows over time. With clinical depression, mixed feelings toward oneself and others, and/or active self-hatred, and physiological problems such as sleep disturbances and fatigue or physical agitation is evident.³⁴ Matsakis reflects that in clinical depression, the negative feelings are so overwhelming that they impair your ability to function. Matsakis then describes visible symptoms: A person cannot get to work, or at least, struggles to do so; the person no longer goes out or socializes.³⁵ Other characteristics of clinical depression

³² Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 75.

³³ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 77.

³⁴ Matsakis, 35.

³⁵ Matsakis, 35.

include having difficulty concentrating enough to finish tasks and/or meeting basic obligations for oneself or family. Indecision often plagues the clinically depressed person. A person who suffers clinical depression may also become hypersensitive to the reactions of others. Consequently, their views about others may be distorted. Low self-esteem also is reflective of the clinically depressed person. Loss of hope in a hopeful situation is another characteristic.³⁶

Like PTSD, clinical depression is highly treatable through psychiatry today. There is no reason for a person with clinical depression to continue to suffer because so much help is available. However, for the clinically depressed person to recognize his or her symptoms and to seek out the necessary help presents a real challenge. A pastor can be most helpful by making referrals to a trained psychotherapist or psychiatrist.

When a person experiences depression, that person often feels that no one else has ever grieved like he or she! It is true that no one has ever grieved exactly the same because everyone experiences loss and grief in his or her unique way. Feeling utterly depressed and isolated, however, is a normal and universal experience. The pastoral counselor can remind his or her parishioners that their feelings of depression, loneliness, and depths of despair are a normal part of the grieving process.

When we are depressed, we find ourselves thinking thoughts we may never have thought otherwise, reflects Westberg in *Good Grief*, stating:

We say God does not care. We may even doubt that there is a God. . . . In the Scriptures we hear strong men like David in the Psalms crying out in

³⁶ Matsakis, footnote, 35-36.

their isolation, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? . . . My soul is cast down within me, . . . I say to God, my rock, why hast Thou forgotten me? . . . My adversaries taint me, while they say continually, "Where is your God?"³⁷

During times when we are experiencing normal depression from grief and loss, we often think "Where is my God?" Jesus Christ on the cross cried out, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Jesus Christ has been our model and archetypal image of questioning the presence of God. In the midst of depression, a person is often convinced that their state of being will remain for the rest of their life.

Many different therapeutic systems work with counseling grieving people. The behavioral theory is one view that is valuable for pastoral counseling with grieving people. According to Matsakis, the behavioral view of depression states that depression is the natural result of inadequate reinforcement, rewards, or recognition: "Depression can easily develop among people who are inadequately rewarded or appreciated by others in their environment. Depression also results when people are unable to adequately appreciate, reward, or lovingly care for themselves."³⁸ People need self-love and self-appreciation, as well as recognition, love and approval from others, for healing within the process of grief, reflects Matsakis. She reflects from her experience as a trauma counselor that trauma survivors are often deprived of both self-love and approval from others. Matsakis reflects that the Vietnam veterans and many service workers are prime examples of depression caused by lack of reinforcement: "In general, until recently, the Vietnam

³⁷ Westberg, 31.

³⁸ Matsakis, 38.

veteran was far from being appreciated by our society. Instead of a welcome-home parade like that which greeted the Persian Gulf veterans, the Vietnam veteran was castigated and rejected for his sacrifices.”³⁹ When a trauma survivor receives emotional rewards, he or she works through the process of depression more effectively.

Erika's grief story: Depression. Several years ago I visited Atis, an electrical engineer, at the hospital. He had just suffered a heart attack. Realizing that he would not survive very long, he was very upset and worried how his wife, Erika, would manage without him. He told me about his wife's problem of clinical depression for many years. They had never talked about their severely retarded daughter who lived in a mental hospital because she was unable to function: to eat by herself or talk. Now Atis told me that story and that Erika had lost her parents in a bombing attack and had been reared by an abusive aunt. Erika was suffering great depression and could barely manage the care of their home.

Before Atis passed away from heart failure a week later, he managed to tell me his grief story. When Atis and Erika had met in Hamburg, Germany, they fell in love and married. They moved to the U.S. and settled in Pennsylvania. He had a good job in New York, but was always concerned about his wife, who was very dependent on him. Atis had always thought that he would survive his wife and, thus, could care for her to the end of her days.

I met Erika the same week in the hospital. She showed signs of depression and never spoke during her hospital visits with Atis or at the funeral service. Then she was left

³⁹ Matsakis, 38.

alone in her house. She tried to manage by herself, but she did not drive a car; thus, a few friends or a neighbor had to take her shopping for the necessities and for visits to the doctors. Then came another shock: Atis had named a good friend the executor of his testament, as well as the power of attorney and executor of his wife's testament. This friend, meaning well, arranged to sell the house because he wanted to place Ērika in a nursing home, where she would be properly cared for with meals and medical care. Upon hearing the executor's decision, Ērika had a mental breakdown and was placed in the mental ward of the hospital.

Ērika felt betrayed by the man who had decided to take her away from her own home. Just the thought of being placed in a strange institution with closed doors, constant supervision, and a total lack of privacy completely unnerved her. Thus, whenever the executor came to visit her, she defiantly turned her back to him and stared at the wall. Also, she did not talk to anyone else, and not even the psychiatrist could get through to her private space. The nurses tried their best, too, but to no avail. She would even curl up in a fetal position on the floor in the middle of the dining room, and they would have to carry her back to her bed.

I visited Ērika about once every other week. I tried to talk with her and said a prayer in her native Latvian language, but there was hardly a response. Repeatedly, I would visit her and, as usual, she did not respond. On one visit I asked her, "Ērika, do you want to pray the Lord's Prayer with me?" She turned around and started praying, slowly and distinctly. This was such a moving experience for me, since I had never heard Ērika speak! However, when we came to the part of asking forgiveness for others, "and forgive

us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” Ērika stopped. She refused to say those words! From then on, every time I visited with her and prayed the Lord’s Prayer, she would again join me in prayer, but every time she would stop at the same place. Her anger was built up like a wall around her and did not let her reach out to the world that had done her wrong!

On one of my visits with Ērika, I asked her why she stopped at that particular line in the Lord’s Prayer. Quite unexpectedly, she started telling me her grief story. She was still angry about the war in which her parents were killed and she was left an orphan with an abusive aunt. An overwhelming amount of anger poured out of her like a river that was flowing over its banks and flooding the plain. She was angry about so many injustices. She was even angry at God, because God had taken away her husband--the only one who unselfishly helped and supported her. She was angry at her power of attorney because he had sold her home and had put her in this public place where she had no privacy and peace!

Ērika had begun to trust me. On subsequent visits, Ērika talked some more. At times her words came haltingly and cautiously, as if expecting some unknown danger or an uninvited listener to overhear our conversation. She admitted that she had received the church’s newsletter. When I asked her if she could find it for me, she moved slowly to her night table, opened the drawer and gave me the newsletter. “Yes, I read it,” she said to me, again cautiously. As I more frequently visited with her, she shared more of her grief story. I rejoiced that we were making progress, but my optimism was premature.

Gradually she fell back into her great depression, and apparently, she was slipping away from all contacts with this world again. The psychiatrist on staff had been visiting with her regularly, and she was on antidepressant medication. I think that Erika was walking out of the anger stage of the grief process into the depression stage. She was making a closure of her life at the age of eighty-nine. Erika never resolved her story.

Although Erika did not move through the stage of depression into acceptance, at least she had finally spoken and shared some of her anger. She also had been able to relate with the Lord's Prayer. Through the ritual of reciting together the Lord's Prayer, which she knew since childhood, she had begun to open up and come forth from the exile of her silence! Although her words were harsh and full of anguish and pain, Erika had spoken. Here was a grace moment for us. In the midst of Erika's suffering had come hope.

In the regression period that followed, Erika just lay in bed lifeless, curled up in a fetal position. At times she groaned a little in her deep depression. She could not be reached, no matter how I or anyone else tried. This stage lasted for more than a year, then she died. I conducted her funeral, and with me were the executor of her testament and his wife, a couple who had been the family's friends many years ago, and a neighbor who had done some shopping for her. She was laid to rest next to her husband with the Lord's Prayer.

Erika's situation of clinical and normal grief depression has been one of the extreme cases in my ministry. However, many parishioners moved beyond normal depression in their grief process into yet another stage, which Kübler-Ross calls acceptance.

Acceptance within the Grief Process

In his story "The Death of Ivan Ilych," Leo Tolstoy insightfully describes how Ivan Ilych, on his deathbed--having gone through all the stages of grief--finally made peace with his wife and children. All he could do is hope that his son would not make the same mistakes in life that he did. Now there was not much time left; he had to act fast--relax and accept death--so that his family would not have to suffer any longer.

"They are sorry, but it will be better for them when I die." He wished to say this but had not the strength to utter it. "Besides, why speak? I must act," he thought. With a look at his wife he indicated his son and said: "Take him away . . . sorry for him . . . sorry for you too. . . ." He tried to add, "forgive me," but said "forgo" and waved his hand, knowing that He whose understanding mattered would understand.

And suddenly it grew clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not leave him was all dropping away at once from two sides, from ten sides, and from all sides. He was sorry for them, he must act so as not to hurt them: release them and free himself from these sufferings. "How good and how simple!" he thought. "And the pain?" he asked himself. "What has become of it? Where are you, pain?"

He turned his attention to it.

"Yes, here it is. Well, what of it? Let the pain be."

"And death . . . where is it?"

He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it.

"Where is it? What death?" There was no fear because there was no death.

In place of death there was light.

"So that's what it is!" he suddenly exclaimed aloud. "What joy!"⁴⁰

Dynamics of acceptance. An individual experiencing the fifth stage of grief, acceptance, will feel less enraged about the experience in one's life and will simply accept it. Acceptance does not mean that one is happy, but rather that one has stopped fighting his or her own limitations and the reality of what has happened.⁴¹ Within the acceptance

⁴⁰ Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," 155-56.

⁴¹ Matsakis, 200.

stage, the person has accepted his or her losses. The more a person makes progress in the process of grief, the more free one will be to present and future opportunities. A person who is in the acceptance stage may reply, "I'm not afraid anymore," or "I have accepted my situation now," or "I'm not afraid to spend time with my thoughts and feelings anymore." According to Kübler-Ross, acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage: "It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain has gone, the struggle is over. . . ." ⁴²

Death is only one form of loss. Various other losses cause us pain and suffering in life. They may be the loss of a loved one or of one's homeland; they may be the loss of one's right arm or one's leg, or of some other injury; they may be the loss of dignity, of freedom, of community. Whatever the loss is, when we reach the stage of acceptance through God's grace in hope, life turns from black-and-white to colorful. In the stage of acceptance, new avenues and opportunities open. We realize that life goes on all around us. At the stage of acceptance, we are ready to take stock of what we have lost and what we have left, and we are ready to build again on the strong base of this realistic inventory of our lives.

The most significant aspect of my visit with Elfrīda was the reaffirmation of her faith in God through telling her faith story.

Elfrīda's grief story: Acceptance. This parishioner is a 74-year-old immigrant who was born and grew up in Riga, Latvia. She told me that she had a hard-working father and mother and an older sister. Her parents died several years ago, and her sister died at the

⁴² Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 100.

age of 82 last year. I performed her sister's funeral. Part of Elfrīda's story is similar to those of many other Latvian immigrants, yet it has a unique aspect of suffering and faith.

Presently Elfrīda lives in a nice residential housing facility for the elderly. She has a lovely one-bedroom apartment with kitchen facilities and the option to eat in the community room if she chooses. Elfrīda was happy to see me when I visited. She was dressed nicely, and had placed fresh flowers on the table. She also prepared tea and Latvian cakes. She served me with her nicest china dishes. We talked for a few minutes about the weather and about her apartment. We also talked about her relationships with her new friends at the residential housing facility into which she had just moved this year. Then we talked about the sale of her house. Her husband had died at an early age about twenty years ago, and she has been a widow ever since. We also talked a bit about her sister's death and how she missed not talking with her.

As we shared her war story, Elfrīda told me of her journey from the displaced persons camp to the U.S. This story was filled with fear, pain, and suffering. It was also a story of wonder, anticipation, faith, joy, and happiness.

The greatest joy in my life has been my relationship with my husband Jānis and my family. My sister was wonderful. Also, one of my greatest joys has been to live here in America for the past forty-five years. There is no country like this one. We have freedom, and I have been grateful for all the opportunities that I have had in my life. Jānis got a good job in a law firm, and I worked hard as a seamstress. We have had our friends here, but what saddens me is that many of them have died. . . . What probably concerns me most is that we keep our democracy and freedom here in America. Also, although Latvia is free, I am concerned about my few cousins, because it is rough for them under bad economic and political conditions, and, on top of all that, the mafia. . . .⁴³

⁴³ Interview with Elfrīda, one of my parishioners.

After a general discussion on world events--most average Latvians are politically astute--I asked the question that cuts to the heart of the matter, to the source of the Latvian immigrants' pain and spiritual transformation: "What have been the most significant moments of conflict and pain for you?" Elfrīda, of course, started with the number one conflict--the war.

The war [WWII] was one of the most significant conflicts and pain in my life. It was horrible. . . . The whole war was horrible. It was a long journey from Latvia to Germany. On the boat we had hardly enough food to eat. . . . I had just delivered a baby girl before we were to go on the boat, and we ran out of food and water. I was so afraid. . . . I took the snow from the deck of the boat and put in the baby bottle and warmed it up under my arm . . . to melt the snow! My baby girl would have died! I prayed so hard to God! I was on my knees praying to God that we would all live and get safely to shore. The bombs were falling right and left from us.⁴⁴

Elfrīda said that God was with them in their tribulations. She and her husband made it through the war, and their daughter Līza survived through the rough journey. Elfrīda told me how she always talked to God in prayer, how her faith in God became ever stronger through these trials and moments of suffering. Her daughter grew up and was married; they have two beautiful children. I had no idea that Elfrīda even had a daughter. "Well," Elfrīda replied, "I do not tell many people about her because she lives in Chicago . . . she left the Latvian community and married an American man." There were a pause and a moment of silence. I sensed Elfrīda's joy about her daughter's marriage, but also some uneasiness that he was not of Latvian descent. But then Elfrīda was quick to add that she always had faith, and that this faith was strengthened during the war. "Today I still live on this faith. I pray regularly and am so grateful that God led us through the war.

⁴⁴ Interview with Elfrida.

There was not much food around, yet we survived. God has been so good to me during my life.”

Elfrīda regularly attends church services and enjoys Bible studies. She shared with me that she enjoys learning about the Bible and that she can see how the characters in the Bible also reflect faith and a significant relationship with God. Her conversation focused mainly on God, and a little on Christ and the Holy Spirit. The sacrament of Holy Communion is very holy for Elfrīda, and she feels through the Eucharist a deeper connection with God and with the Latvian Lutheran community. She grieves over the loss of Latvian friends who have died, but she is beginning to make new friends at her residential home with several elderly Americans. When in bad weather she cannot attend our services, she goes to the Lutheran church in the neighborhood. She seems to have adjusted nicely to the American Lutheran church and feels that worship is important in English as well. I affirmed these new relationships for her, for as Elfrīda gets older, developing relationships close by is significant for her spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development. I encouraged her to continue these relationships.

To my last question, “What visions do you have for the ministry of the church?” Elfrīda reflected on the hope for the churches in Latvia, and for her local American Lutheran church. One of her concerns was for the Lutheran Archbishop in Latvia, who is not supportive of women in the ministry. She reflected how significant our relationship has been over the past few years. She also shared how meaningful it has been for her to be ministered to by a female pastor. Her vision also included world and local peace within our

communities. This visitation with Elfrīda was significant for both of us. As I experienced in this visit with Elfrīda, God's love and power to heal are a part of our faith journey!

God's presence in our faith journey to the acceptance of our losses gives meaning to the teller and the listener of grief stories. When we realize that God has accepted us in our finitude, we also can accept our losses. Also, when we realize that God has forgiven us, we also can forgive others, even those who have caused our suffering and our losses. That is the ultimate stage of acceptance.

CHAPTER 6

Theology and Storytelling within the Community

Theology is the systematic study of God and God's divinity within a community. According to Mary Elizabeth Moore, in her book *Education for Continuity and Change*, theology is the studied expression of faith within a community: "Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available."¹ Moore reflects that this suggests the Christian community is necessarily engaged in theologizing, or forming theology, if it is to function as a community of faith. According to Moore, theologizing is not abstracted from life of that community.

Theologizing involves the actions of both participation in and reflection on that community of faith. Theology, then, is a study from within faith. According to theologian John Cobb, as quoted in Moore's book, Christian theology centers in the Christ as the source of the deepest insight into the nature of reality.² Theology, according to Moore, also requires reflection upon faith. This process involves both the subjective and the objective aspects of faith. Often a healthy sense of tension exists between the subjective and objective aspects of theology. This process of theology is integral to the development of theology within a community. Moore insightfully reflects that to recognize this dynamic nature of theology is to recognize that the traditioning community does not have a

¹ Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Education for Continuity and Change: A New Model for Christian Religious Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 68.

² Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Education for Continuity and Change*, 69.

theology so much as it theologizes.³ This idea so vividly describes a community that is in process of theologizing and is actively involved in defining, sustaining, and creating theology within a faith community. Since we stand within faith, we have certain faith assumptions that need to be clarified, broadened, deepened, and transformed. Moore states, "Faith here is understood as an active way of being that includes all dimensions of personhood: believing, feeling, willing, and acting. The study of faith, then, will involve the study of beliefs, attitudes, commitments, and practices. No one dimension can be singled out to the exclusion of the others."⁴

To understand that God is in the midst of story telling, we must turn to narrative theology. William J. Bausch combines the theory and practice of narrative theology, and brings philosophical insights into the storytelling process. Darrell J. Fasching expands on Bausch's view. This chapter also deals with the question of confession and forgiveness in the journey through loss and grieving.

Narrative Theology

Ministering as a pastor and serving as a hospital chaplain over the past several years has challenged me and empowered me to integrate my theological knowledge and understanding to serve people in a crisis or situation of conflict. I am often asked theological questions, and I find the process of theologizing for a sermon, a pastoral counseling situation, or a crisis with a patient or family in the hospital is challenging, rewarding, and meaningful for me, for the immediate family, and for the community as a

³ Moore, *Education for Continuity and Change*, 70.

⁴ Moore, *Education for Continuity and Change*, 70.

whole. My faith and the faith of the community become incorporated as we experience life and theologize together. This process is empowered by the individuals within community and by the grace of God, which empowers us all.

The empowerment from storytelling comes from the wisdom, imagination, and the faith of people in community and is grounded in the deepest levels of truth, as received from God. William J. Bausch discusses practical applications, especially religious applications, and philosophy for storytelling.

William J. Bausch and the Theology of Imagination

Bausch, in his book *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, has produced a dynamic work on Narrative Theology, which combines theory and practice and brings philosophical insights into the storytelling process. He includes many stories from the masters of antiquity to authors of more recent days within many religious and secular traditions. Bausch celebrates the power of stories to capture and pass on from one generation to the next the wisdom, imagination, and the faith of a people! Bausch reflects that storytelling and story listening are so congenial because we are essentially hearing about ourselves. He states, "Storytelling is so natural to human beings, it suggests a definition: we are the creatures who think in stories."⁵

As a Roman Catholic priest serving St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Colts Neck, New Jersey, Bausch writes from his parish experience and reflects that the creeds and catechisms have dominated our thought patterns; yet in all areas of life, it seems that there is a reaction setting in toward including sharing our imaginative stories with one

⁵ Bausch, 9.

another.⁶ He reflects that increasingly the art of storytelling is making itself felt in our communities and that he feels storytelling is undergoing a revival in our day! Bausch profoundly states that it is the story and all related art forms that touch us at our deepest levels and convince us of truth!

Bausch strongly emphasizes imagination in relation to theology and story. He states that the imaginative is a counteraction to the undue emphasis upon the rational and the logical in religion.⁷ He reflects that both the intellectual and the intuitive must be affirmed within the process of storytelling. Bausch makes an interesting distinction between our process of thought and feeling, as expressed in the tension between the creed and the story: "A belief system without a creed may be too amorphous to survive in a propositional culture like our own. But a belief system without a story may lack human vitality!"⁸ He explains that both story and creed are simple. Story is an attempt to resonate and represent an experience, while creed, far removed from experience, is a result of philosophical refinement and purification and distillation of the experience.⁹

In his book Bausch also emphasizes the practical application of the story within the parish setting. He states, "The parish is the fundamental place of story for the average person. It is here that the Larger Story is proclaimed in the various liturgies and paraliturgies. It is here that our personal stories are counterpointed against this Larger

⁶ Bausch, 9.

⁷ Bausch, 11.

⁸ Bausch, 12.

⁹ Bausch, 12.

Story, where we whisper them in the sacraments of reconciliation, birth them in baptism, affirm them in confirmation, celebrate them in the Eucharist, and so on.”¹⁰ Bausch points out that the parish is the space and place in which storytelling and story healing take place for most people.¹¹ I would also include the hospital setting, pastoral counseling office, and classroom setting in places for storytelling and story hearing.

In the beginning of his book, Bausch examines the whole shift from the doctrinal proposition we have known in our church in the past to what is called narrative theology. As he weaves stories throughout his book, Bausch also reflects significantly that the stories he is sharing with us are not to be seen as illustrations of the text: “The stories are the text. All the rest is commentary.”¹² Bausch reflects that God’s story and our stories are somehow original experiences.

Maybe that’s where our ‘image and likeness’ reside: we’re paragraphs of the same story. However, something happened to our mutual stories. People, gifted with intelligence by that same story-God, began to reflect on our mutual stories. In due time they began to draw conclusions and finally they codified them into propositions, systems, and creeds. The result has been what we call systematic theology.¹³

¹⁰ Bausch, 12.

¹¹ Bausch, 12.

¹² Bausch, 13.

¹³ Bausch, 16.

Bausch states that we must understand that such theology is not the raw experience of our stories themselves; rather, it is an intellectual sorting out of the experiences to talk about them philosophically.¹⁴ He states,

This [theology] is a good and needed thing and gives the professionals the necessary categories and vocabulary to talk to one another and to teach us. Nevertheless, there are two severe drawbacks to such a development, drawbacks that only recently we are trying to overcome.¹⁵

Bausch lists these drawbacks: a codified systematic theology is wedded to a specific system and thus affects its conclusions and expressions; also, all systematic theologies to this extent are closed off to others with different assumption and groundings, and so are only a piece of the whole.¹⁶ Bausch concludes his idea with the summary statement that “for both these reasons the systematic theologies are limited, dated, and partial.”¹⁷ Bausch has a good point here, but I think he is too one-sided and a bit negative toward systematic theology. A connection and relationship exist here among narrative theology and the Bible (text), tradition, theological reason, and experience. I believe that if we keep the perspective of our systematic theology in balance with our personal and experiential expression of our theology through storytelling or other means, we will be able to grow into a holistic, practical, and intellectually challenging living theology!

¹⁴ Bausch, 16.

¹⁵ Bausch, 16.

¹⁶ Bausch, 16.

¹⁷ Bausch, 16.

More reflections from Bausch on this topic include his thoughts that theology is to religious narrative what literary criticism is to literature—commentary upon a more basic form of expression. He states, “I am one of a number of theologians today who believes that theology has, in the course of time, removed itself too far from its roots in narrative.”¹⁸ I believe that the story and one’s personal experiences are integral to the systematic process of defining theology. Bausch was one of the pioneers who paved the new road to integrating stories and one’s personal experiences within theology. I do appreciate and understand the necessity to integrate and incorporate one’s story or the community’s story within a systematic theology. To understand God, I believe, we need to begin to understand ourselves. It is through the Biblical stories, stories recorded throughout history within our communities, each other’s stories, and our own stories that we come to understand ourselves, others, and God more profoundly.

Bausch does insightfully reflect that, to the extent that we are returning to the “first” ways that God spoke through his prophets—in sign, symbol, metaphor, and anecdote—and by his Son Jesus Christ—in parables—to that extent we are moving into what is called narrative theology or the theology of storytelling.¹⁹ He emphasizes that “it is going back to the original language to hear the story, not as a text or as a science dissertation, but as poetry and story and all the other categories people use who strain to express the inexpressible.”²⁰ According to Bausch, all theologies therefore must somehow

¹⁸ Bausch, 17.

¹⁹ Bausch, 19.

²⁰ Bausch, 19.

tap into and reflect life and point to story. All stories are ultimately meant to be theological!²¹

Bausch reflects that systematic theology rightfully philosophizes on the ultimate mysteries in life and sheds light on them. He strongly suggests that *it is the story that carries power*. He asks us some questions that are significant to finding meaning and truth in our own stories as we share them with one another and listen to one another. I found these questions very helpful. Bausch asks, “What do you think?” or “How does it move you?” and “What truth did you encounter?”²² These are some significant questions that have led theologians back to narrative theology, according to Bausch.

The Spirit of Jesus, says Bausch, was rekindled within the last few years through the retelling of the parables and the renewed interest in narrative theology.²³ Bausch reflects upon the movement of narrative theology: “So the stories began—and so did the faith. That is how the faith got started: in storytelling. And that is what was recorded in the gospels: stories of and about Jesus and the impact that he made on people.”²⁴ Another factor in the emergence of storytelling, according to Bausch, has been the impact of modern science and research in psychology. Bausch quotes a story about a subatomic physicist to make this point:

²¹ Bausch, 19.

²² Bausch, 21.

²³ Bausch, 22.

²⁴ Bausch, 22.

Probing inside the atom, scientists . . . could no longer rely on logic and common sense. Atomic physics provided the scientist with the first glimpse of the essential nature of things. Like the mystics, physicists are now dealing with a nonsensory experience of reality and, like the mystics, they had to face the paradoxical aspects of this experience.²⁵

Bausch profoundly concludes this idea with the reflection that dreams, myths, symbols, and imagination are all related, and all find their best expression in art, especially the art of storytelling!²⁶ The artist and the storyteller therefore become our guides in the pursuit of truth, as do the philosophers and the theologians.

The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 contains all of the characteristics of a good story, according to Bausch. He proceeds to outline thirteen significant characteristics of the story through two chapters in his book. He reflects that we can discover these thirteen characteristics of any good story.

The first characteristic of a story is that stories provoke curiosity and compel repetition.²⁷ The second is that stories unite us in a holistic way to nature, our common stuff of existence.²⁸ Here Bausch reflects upon fascinating stories about humanity's connection with nature and the story's ability and power to reunite humanity more holistically to nature! The third characteristic of a story is that stories are a bridge to one's culture, one's roots.²⁹ This aspect of story is significant to the stories that I hear from my

²⁵ Bausch, 23.

²⁶ Bausch, 25.

²⁷ Bausch, 30.

²⁸ Bausch, 32.

²⁹ Bausch, 33.

parishioners about World War II, immigration to America by way of Germany, and the story of the Latvians integrating into American culture. Bausch defines the fourth characteristic of a story as binding us to all of humankind, to the universal, human family.³⁰ Human themes as reflected in the Bible relate to our universal human story. The fifth characteristic of a story is that stories help us to remember.³¹ The sixth characteristic of a story is that stories use a special language.³² The seventh characteristic of a story is that stories restore the original power of the word.³³ Here Bausch creatively quotes some poetry of William Luce's play about the life of Emily Dickinson to explain this characteristic. The eighth characteristic of story is that stories provide escape.³⁴ Bausch reflects that through story we sometimes escape from boredom and from reality when "the world is too much with us."³⁵ He suggests that people often escape from hurts of some kind. The positive aspect of storytelling in this situation is often that after the temporary detour is accomplished, we return from the story refreshed. Most stories, according to Bausch (at least children's stories), have happy endings, and point (theologically) to a

³⁰ Bausch, 34.

³¹ Bausch, 36.

³² Bausch, 38.

³³ Bausch, 40.

³⁴ Bausch, 43.

³⁵ Bausch, 45.

redeemed world.³⁶ To this extent, reflects Bausch, every story is religious!³⁷ The ninth characteristic is that stories evoke right-brain imagination, tenderness, and therefore wholeness.³⁸ The tenth characteristic is that stories promote healing.³⁹ Here Bausch reflects upon the stories of Martin Buber and how stories indeed contain a redemptive and healing quality. The eleventh characteristic is that every story is our story.⁴⁰ The twelfth characteristic is that stories provide a basis for hope and morality.⁴¹ Bausch concludes his informative list of characteristics with the thirteenth characteristic that stories are the basis for ministry. All these characteristics have teaching qualities and contain elements of spirituality and wholeness!

Bausch suggests six appropriate challenges that could exist within the story as an integral part of narrative theology. The first paradox of story according to Bausch is that spirituality is rooted in earthiness. He reflects that a “spiritual” person is one who is rooted in earthiness while in the realm of the spiritual dimension.⁴² The second paradox of story is that the absolute is known in the personal. Bausch reflects that the absolute is known in

³⁶ Bausch, 46.

³⁷ Bausch, 46.

³⁸ Bausch, 47.

³⁹ Bausch, 54.

⁴⁰ Bausch, 58.

⁴¹ Bausch, 60.

⁴² Bausch, 68.

the individual, never in the abstract. It is known in the personal and in the relational.⁴³ To illustrate this concept, Bausch then tells a few stories that are quite moving. The third paradox of story is that freedom is discovered in obedience. Bausch reflects that to be truly free is to be obedient to God's law. The 613 Jewish commandments of the Law are not seen as restrictions but as ways of being free to be God's people. Obedience is liberating.⁴⁴ The fourth paradox of story is that triumph grows out of suffering. Bausch reflects: "Truly, he who loses his life for my sake will find it. Triumph grows out of suffering."⁴⁵ The fifth paradox of story is that security is found in uncertainty. Bausch reflects that in religion one is called to let go of false securities (idols) and to take a journey to discover real security on a higher level. This is the paradox!⁴⁶ He reflects that for us, security is having all things in place, the future predicted with certainty and assurance, and being well provided for. In his bestseller novel *The Road Less Traveled*, modern psychiatrist and author Scott M. Peck reflects upon the paradox of taking the spiritual journey that is usually the road less traveled in life and yet one of the most rewarding journeys upon which an individual can embark. The sixth paradox of story is that prayer is offered through study. Bausch reflects that mind and heart are both pleasing to God: "The academic and the spiritual can never be separated, which is why there is the

⁴³ Bausch, 68.

⁴⁴ Bausch, 71.

⁴⁵ Bausch, 75.

⁴⁶ Bausch, 75.

Jewish saying that 'no table is blessed if there is not a scholar to eat at it.'"⁴⁷ Bausch gently reflects and concludes his writings about the six paradoxes with his original thesis that it is through stories that we are carried back to the richness of God's house.⁴⁸ Bausch's excellent book reflects upon the significance of narrative theology and provides an interesting and well-written book about the power of stories as part of our process in getting to know and understand ourselves, others, and God.

Throughout Bausch's book on narrative theology, he expounds the paradox of gaining through losing, having security in insecurity, having freedom in obedience, triumphing in our suffering. Storytelling imaginatively can lead us down this path in a very understandable way. Even little children love and understand stories. Fairytales are folklore with deep insights of the truths of life. The books of the Bible, also, contain the wisdom of the religious community, as handed down through wonderful stories told in faith and received through revelation. Darrell J. Fasching's interpretation of narrative theology is based on Jewish interpretation. It expounds the image of Jacob's wrestling with the Stranger, the Wholly other, who in the end blesses Jacob. This image fits into my project as it leads to the successful conclusion of the journey of loss and suffering within the faith community.

Darrell J. Fasching and Theology of Alienation

Another excellent book on narrative theology that reflects upon the power of the story is Darrell J. Fasching's *Narrative Theology After Auschwitz: From Alienation to*

⁴⁷ Bausch, 78.

⁴⁸ Bausch, 80.

Ethics. This book also has been an excellent source for my D.Min. project in working with the stories of the Latvian immigrant population's suffering. In this book, Darrell J. Fasching points out that only when we wrestle with the stranger, whether it is our neighbor or our enemy, we can begin to grasp both who we are and who God is.⁴⁹

Fasching reflects upon the power of the Genesis story of Jacob wrestling with the stranger. Fasching reflects that when we wrestle with the stranger, as the Biblical story implies, we wrestle with the infinite unfathomableness of both the divine and the human. We wrestle with the God who can neither be named nor imaged but, paradoxically, in whose image we are created. "When we wrestle with God, we become strangers to ourselves and thus can identify with the experience of the stranger and welcome the stranger into our lives as the one whose very strangeness or otherness mediates the presence of the Wholly other."⁵⁰

According to Fasching, through the story of Jacob's encounter with the stranger, we come to learn that wrestling with the one who is alien or different does not have to lead to the victory of one over the other. It can lead instead to mutual respect.⁵¹ Fasching profoundly reflects that as Jacob wins the wrestling match, the stranger is not defeated and blesses him before departing.⁵² Fasching reflects that there is a lesson for doing theology

⁴⁹ Darrell J. Fasching, *Narrative Theology after Auschwitz: From Alienation to Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1992), 1.

⁵⁰ Fasching, 2.

⁵¹ Fasching, 2.

⁵² Fasching, 2.

and ethics in this story about Jacob wrestling with the stranger: Theology is not so much a matter of metaphysics as it is a task of reflecting on our encounter with the “other” as the occasion for understanding our relationship to the Wholly Other—and of coming to understand ourselves and what is required of us through this double encounter.

Theology is rooted in our experience of alienation, for it is our experience of being a stranger (even to ourselves) that opens us up to the possibility of welcoming the stranger as the ‘holy other.’”⁵³ This theology of alienation reflects much of the work done by Martin Buber as reflected in his theological concept of the “I-Thou Relationship.” Fasching also reflects that alienated theology is an attempt to critique one’s own tradition by imaginatively experiencing it through the eyes of the other who stands outside one’s tradition, as if one were the other who has been, or will be, affected by it.⁵⁴

Fasching’s book is a project in, and an invitation to, decentered or alienated theology within the context of narrative theology that is fascinating and moving to read. Here Fasching bases his concept of decentered and alienation theology upon liberation theology. His emphasis upon the suffering Christ (paralleled with the suffering people of Auschwitz) is a significant aspect of decentered and alienation theology. Also, Fasching reflects upon the devastation of the faith community in the midst of a crisis and suffering: suffering from past generations to the present. The suffering peoples of Auschwitz and future generations carry the scar and pain of experiencing decenterization of their faith community and the suffering of alienation. His theology does reflect hope in the concept

⁵³ Fasching, 2.

⁵⁴ Fasching, 3.

of the “two kingdoms” that he borrows from Martin Luther.⁵⁵ Luther’s theology of hope in the midst of suffering provides the concept that we live both in the kingdom of our present community and in the eternal kingdom of salvation. For Fasching, integrating Luther’s concept of freedom and salvation through the “two kingdoms” provides hope and a light at the end of the tunnel for those experiencing suffering, decentralization from their faith community, and alienation from others, self, and God.

Fasching uses many Biblical images to reflect his theology. He reflects heavily upon the story of Job. He also draws insights and theology from Augustine to Luther. Fasching reflects profoundly as he relates alienation theology with narrative theology: “This symbolic process that mediates our links to the larger social and historical projects in which we live, move, and have our being can occur only through an ongoing dialogue between one’s own narrative tradition and the narrative traditions of the stranger.”⁵⁶ When professionals find their destiny through stories that encourage doubt and hospitality to the stranger, according to Fasching, they become midwives of the utopian destiny of the city.⁵⁷ For it is by living within such stories and by having surrendered to the questions, reflects Fasching, that they no longer seek to control this destiny. Instead, they nurture its theonomous dynamic of self-transcendence through which all things can be made new. Fasching concludes his book on a positive and hopeful note, having weaved alienation

⁵⁵ Fasching, 153.

⁵⁶ Fasching, 185.

⁵⁷ Fasching, 185.

theology with narrative theology in a splendid tapestry, that when we welcome the stranger, the reign of God draws near and all things become possible!

Much of Fasching's positive approach to alienation theology and narrative theology has influenced my project, especially in dealing with the loss and suffering of the Latvian immigrant community. Also, drawing, as Fasching does, on Luther's theology of hope in the midst of suffering, I envision the conclusion of loss and suffering as leading through confession to forgiveness, and resulting in final liberation of the spirit through the grace of God.

Confession and Forgiveness

A former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp was visiting a friend who had shared the ordeal with him.

"Have you forgiven the Nazis?" he asked his friend.

"Yes."

"Well, I haven't. I'm still consumed with hatred for them."

"In that case," said his friend gently, "they still have you in prison."⁵⁸

Resentment, unexpressed anger, and past injustices can imprison us all. Emotions of anger and resentment are useful for us to identify within the process of telling our stories, because they guide us back in time to recover memories that we might have forgotten. Hopefully, through the process of telling our stories, we can rediscover our emotions and bring the process of healing toward more wholeness in life. It is through the process of storytelling that we can walk through our grief process (as reflected in Chapter

⁵⁸ Richard Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling: A Sacred Journey of Personal Discovery* (New York: Hyperion, 1996), 171.

5) and begin to forgive ourselves for our pain in life, forgive others for abuse and injustice, and forgive God! Forgiveness is the process of “letting go” of the hurt, anger, bitterness, and resentment that are an inevitable part of the loss and grief process.

Lutheran Traditions

The Lutheran interpretation of the process of sin and forgiveness is discussed at length through many sections of *The Book of Concord*. The “Augsburg Confession,” written in 1530, reflects the nature of sin, evil, and the process of forgiveness. In “Article XIX: The Cause of Sin,” sin is reflected as the perverted will of the devil and of all ungodly humans:

It is taught among us that although almighty God has created and still preserves nature, yet sin is caused in all wicked men and despisers of God by the perverted will. This is the will of the devil and of all ungodly men; as soon as God withdraws his support, the will turns away from God to evil. It is as Christ says in John 8:44, “When the devil lies, he speaks according to his own nature.”⁵⁹

The evil of the world and of the devil is reflected within the war and immigration stories of the Latvian immigrants as they share about the injustices of the Soviet government; pain, brutality, and senseless killings of the war; suffering and torture in the Siberian concentration camps; the suffering of hunger; and loss of community. The question often asked is, “Where do we begin our process of forgiveness?” I think we begin to forgive ourselves, others, and God through first identifying our hurts. Most of the time, this process begins with looking back into our memories and beginning to tell our stories from the past. Some hurts will be extremely painful and others will be more subtle.

⁵⁹ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 40-41.

As reflected in the “Augsburg Confession,” ordained pastors are committed to preach the Gospel, to administer the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, and to hear the confession of sins. In Article XXVIII the order of the role of bishop and pastor are outlined. Also interpreted is John’s Gospel, reflecting the heart of the process of forgiveness: “For Christ sent out the disciples with this command, ‘As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’ (John 20:21-23).”⁶⁰ We receive the power, strength, and ability from God to forgiveness of sins. As stated in “Article IV: Justification,”

In the fourth, fifth, and sixth articles, and later in the twentieth, they condemn us for teaching that men do not receive the forgiveness of sins because of their own merits, but freely for Christ’s sake, by faith in him. They condemn us both for denying that men receive the forgiveness of sins because of their merits, and for affirming that men receive the forgiveness of sins by faith and by faith in Christ are justified. In this controversy the main doctrine of Christianity is involved. . . .⁶¹

It is through God’s grace and our response in faith to this grace bestowed upon us that we can forgive ourselves and others. From a Lutheran tradition, forgiveness is a promise given by Christ Jesus through his death and resurrection. The promise is described in the Augsburg confession as follows:

Therefore men cannot keep the law by their own strength, and they are all under sin and subject to eternal wrath and death. On this account the law

⁶⁰ *Book of Concord*, 81-82.

⁶¹ *Book of Concord*, 107.

cannot free us from sin and justify us, but the promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification was given because of Christ.⁶²

Christ is thus understood as essential for the forgiveness of sins. Through Christ's death on the cross, all sins were forgiven. Through the cross Christ has brought victory over sin, evil, and death!

As in most religious denominations, so also in our Latvian Lutheran liturgy, we begin every worship service with the Confession and the Forgiveness of Sins to prepare our hearts and minds for the community worship service:

Visuspēcīgais Dievs, žēlīgais Tēvs!

Es, nabaga grēcinieks, Tev sūdzu savus grēkus, ar ko esmu apgrēkojies domās, vārdos un darbos, un ar ko esmu pelnījis Tavas dusmas un sodu laikā un mūžībā. Bet es tos no sirds nožēloju un tie man gauži sāp. Tavas lielās apžēlošanas un Tava mīļā Dēla Jēzus Kristus, mana Pestītāja, rūgto ciešanu un miršanas dēļ, es Tevi lūdzu: apžēlo mani, piedod man visus manus grēkus un dod man sava Svētā Gara palīgu, ka varu atgriezties.⁶³

Almighty God, merciful Father!

I, poor sinner, confess my sins, which I have committed in thought, word and deed, and for which I deserve your wrath and punishment now and for eternity. However, from the depth of my heart I repent of these sins, as they are grievously hurting me. For the sake of your great mercy, and because of the bitter sufferings and death of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, my Savior, I beg you, have mercy on me, forgive me all my sins, and give me your Holy Spirit as a helper, so that I could return to you.

Within the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran theological tradition, people believe that we must confess the nature of our sins before we can receive the forgiveness of our sins. Through the power of transformation and God's forgiveness of sins, we are then able to experience

⁶² *Book of Concord*, 112.

⁶³ *Dziesmu grāmata latviešiem tēvzemē un svešumā* [Hymnal for Latvians in the fatherland and in foreign countries], 5.

the forgiveness of sins of others. The church community provides a healthy structure for the parishioners to experience healing through the public confession and forgiveness of sins.

Confession is very helpful for parishioners suffering from traumatic experiences in their past. In their article in *Traumatic Stress*, Turner, McFarlane, and van der Kolk reinforce the importance of the act of forgiveness within the liturgical worship service as expressed within prayers, music, and icons. They state,

Religion provides a historical lineage of human suffering and capacity for regeneration. Prayers, music, and icons provide a powerful sense of endurance, despite the repeated onslaughts of disaster and war; prayer and identification with the suffering of others also can provide a way forward.⁶⁴

The liturgy in the Latvian Lutheran Church has remained practically unchanged since Luther's time. Thus, it has provided a powerful sense of stability and endurance through the centuries and times of great upheaval in Latvian history. Today, the same liturgy is used in worship services both in Latvia and in Latvian Lutheran churches throughout the world; since 1992, we again have one common hymnal and liturgy; and presently the liturgical commission is completing the project of one common agenda (Scripture passages for each Sunday). Thus, visitors from Latvia feel at ease when participating in a Latvian Lutheran worship in Sweden, Germany, the U.S., Venezuela, or

⁶⁴ Stuart W. Turner, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Bessel A. van der Kolk, "The Therapeutic Environment and New Explorations in the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," in *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, eds. Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 551.

Australia. Through their public confession, they can receive the power of transformation, experience God's forgiveness of sins, and can experience the forgiveness of sins of others.

Contemporary Quests to Understand and Practice Forgiveness

Some fears of beginning to share past hurts through storytelling are very real for some people. They may have a mental block that protects them from intrusion or criticism, which may further endanger their personalities or their position. On the other hand, such a mental block may prevent them from being healed by forgiving those who hurt them and going on with life.

In their book *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace With Your Past and Get on With Your Life*, Sidney and Suzanne Simon reflect some dynamic concepts about the process of forgiveness. These authors reflect upon the fears and reasons that most people resist telling others their grief stories. Simon and Simon state:

This perspective [of negating the need to forgive] reflects the idea that attempting to forgive the people who hurt you will:
open up a Pandora's box;
send you plunging into an emotional abyss;
force you to relive unpleasant experiences and admit how badly you were hurt in the first place;
maybe leave you vulnerable to being hurt again.⁶⁵

Simon and Simon state that if a person feels that way about forgiveness, then for some reason the person might just be afraid to forgive:

Perhaps anger, bitterness, and resentment serve as a barrier that protects you from pain, anxiety, and self-doubt. Or you may believe that any move you make to forgive the people who once hurt you will unleash a tidal wave of frightening emotions and mind-boggling questions. For perhaps the first time in decades, you will be forced to seriously consider the

⁶⁵ Simon and Simon, 13-14.

magnitude of old injuries and injustices as well as acknowledge the damaged life you have led because of them. You will have to admit you were hurt and examine the details of how, when, and why you were hurt. What's more, you may have to give up the attitudes and behaviors that have protected you from being hurt again.⁶⁶

Such realization can, indeed, frighten people. Simon and Simon, however, assure us that to be survivors, make free choices, and enjoy life fully, it is well worth our effort to forgive and to make peace with the past. They state, "We believe that the life you have now and can keep by not forgiving is not nearly as full and fulfilling as the life you could create by letting go of the pain and making peace with the past."⁶⁷ Then hopefully the process of forgiveness can begin. Not forgiving someone is destructive to relationships because usually this involves manipulating family or friends to "take your side." Not forgiving drains a person of his or her life energy and consumes time and thoughts. Although forgiveness is often difficult to do, over time, through the process of forgiveness, hurts are healed!

Furthermore, they stress that "forgiveness is not forgetting, . . . not condoning, . . . not absolution, . . . not a form of self-sacrifice, . . . not a clear-cut, one-time decision."⁶⁸ On the positive side, as Simon and Simon point out,

Forgiveness is a by-product of an ongoing healing process.
 Forgiveness is an *internal* process.
 Forgiveness is a sign of positive self-esteem.
 Forgiveness is letting go of the intense emotions attached to incidents from our past.

⁶⁶ Simon and Simon, 14.

⁶⁷ Simon and Simon, 15.

⁶⁸ Simon and Simon, 15-18.

Forgiveness is recognizing that we no longer *need* our grudges and resentments, our hatred and self-pity.
 Forgiveness is no longer wanting to punish the people who hurt us.
 Forgiveness is accepting that nothing we do to punish *them* will heal *us*.
 Forgiveness is freeing up and putting to better use the energy once consumed by holding grudges, harboring resentments, and nursing unhealed wounds.
 Forgiveness is moving on.⁶⁹

Within a trusted relationship with a friend or pastor, a person can begin to trust their story of pain and hurt and begin to identify the hurt and losses in one's life.

Forgiveness, like grief, is a process. Simon and Simon reflect that forgiveness is the gift at the end of the healing process.⁷⁰ According to Simon and Simon, forgiveness occurs when we can put the past into its proper perspective and when we realize that the injuries and injustices are just a part of our life and just a part of who we are, rather than all of us.⁷¹ Within the process of forgiveness, the intensity of our feelings of fear, anger, and resentment lessen. Forgiveness is also the ability to move on with our lives. They advise that one does not have to try to heal alone:

Any burden becomes lighter when you share it. You do not have to heal yourself all by yourself. You can get counseling, join a support group, or participate in a self-help or twelve-step recovery program like Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, or Overeaters Anonymous.⁷²

Many parishioners whom I have counseled and walked with through their loss and grief process have told me that they have experienced forgiveness during their acceptance

⁶⁹ Simon and Simon, 18-19.

⁷⁰ Simon and Simon, 18.

⁷¹ Simon and Simon, 18.

⁷² Simon and Simon, 75-76.

stage of the grief process. When forgiveness took place in their lives, these parishioners shared with me that they felt like the heavy burden of war and the immigration experience had been lifted from their soul. They shared with me that they felt relieved and energized in life to start new activities, hobbies, or make life style changes.

Forgiveness also is an act of the will for the spirit to forgive. Doris Donnelly, in her book *Putting Forgiveness into Practice*, reflects that when it comes to forgiveness, an individual does not need to know how you are going to forgive, determine a precise strategy, or even see its actual possibility; all an individual needs to do is decide that forgiveness is what he or she wills to do.⁷³ The individual wills the good for a person or situation with forgiveness.

Donnelly reflects how Viktor Frankl, in his book *The Will to Meaning*, tells his story about his survival of depression, despair, and dehumanization in Auschwitz and Dachau. He decided to assume that there was meaning in the suffering that he and others were enduring. Donnelly reflects, "He did not know what the meaning was, but making an act of the will that there was, that there *had to be meaning*, was a precious survival strategy."⁷⁴ One of the most challenging aspects beyond forgiving others or the government or the war is to forgive oneself; however, as a victim, one should not feel that one needs to forgive oneself. Self-blame and survivor's guilt from a traumatic war experience can plague an individual for years! Donnelly states,

⁷³ Doris Donnelly, *Putting Forgiveness into Practice* (Valencia, Calif.: DLM, Tabor Publishing, 1982), 20.

⁷⁴ Donnelly, 20.

The point is that another's forgiveness can be real in your life only if you forgive yourself. If you are carrying a burden of guilt because you have not yet forgiven yourself, this may be the time to accept God's forgiveness and begin a new life.⁷⁵

Forgiveness is ultimately a matter of faith. Faith in the willingness and desire to forgive! Since one aspect of the church community is to model forgiveness, we learn the process of forgiveness within our church community. Hopefully, our churches are communities where forgiving neighbors can exist side by side. Through our confession in church we are all called as a community to share with one another in the process of repentance and forgiveness. As a church community, we also express forgiveness of sins through the sacraments of Baptism (for original sin) and Holy Communion (for our daily sins). Forgiveness does not occur in isolation, but through the loving support of our church communities.

Through the process of forgiveness we become more aware of ourselves and more aware of others around us. Marsha Sinetar, in her book *Elegant Choices, Healing Choices*, observes that as we grow in self-acceptance, we face an intriguing, but also frustrating, irony: as we become healthier, we sometimes feel less so, especially at first. What is happening is that we become more aware of what we do to get in our own way.⁷⁶ Deciding to forgive is making a healthy and healing choice. Ultimately, forgiveness does bring freedom, healing, and wholeness to the self.

⁷⁵ Donnelly, 21.

⁷⁶ Marsha Sinetar, *Elegant Choices, Healing Choices* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 113.

Process theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, in her book *The Fall to Violence*, reflects upon the concepts of sin and forgiveness in relational theology. Reflecting that forgiveness may be the most difficult virtue, Suchocki states that

to hope for transformation is to transcend the present through the vision of a different future. Forgiveness as the active will toward well-being is the creation of a new human future, and thus forgiveness is the substance of human hope.⁷⁷

She also reflects hope in this statement: "If sin corrupts our times, forgiveness redeems our times."⁷⁸ Living in a relational world, our actions of either sin or forgiveness do matter and affect others--all of creation--and God.

We hope that, by deciding to walk through our grief process, we also will be able to forgive those who have brought on violence or injustice upon us. We can will the best for those we want to forgive through our thoughts, feelings, actions, and prayers. Thereby we can participate in the divine and human will of our community. Suchocki states,

To forgive is to participate in the nature of God. And God's forgiveness of us is God's acceptance of ourselves toward the end of our transformation as individuals in an ever-enlarging community. Ultimately, that community is the reconciliation of all things, beyond all sin, within God's own self. There is a vision that informs us. The vision is drawn from the whole universe of relations, and it bespeaks the beauty of reciprocal well-being, of justice, of love without boundary. . . . The vision is brought ever to fruition through the divine and human event of forgiveness.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1994), 153.

⁷⁸ Suchocki, 153.

⁷⁹ Suchocki, 160.

Through the process and act of forgiveness, we can will the best for ourselves, others, and for all creation.

As humans we are free to decide to forgive. Karl Barth, in *Dogmatics in Outline*, raises the paradox of freedom and responsibility that can also be related to the concept of forgiveness:

To have inner ears for the Word of Christ, to become thankful for His work and at the same time responsible for the message about Him and, lastly, to take confidence in men for Christ's sake--that is the freedom which we obtain, when Christ breathes on us, when He sends us His Holy Spirit.⁸⁰

When we receive Christ's Holy Spirit, through this grace we may have hope for ourselves and for all others. In other words, Barth states, "I may live in a Christian way." How does Barth understand living in a Christian way? He stresses baptism, through which we have died with Christ to our past, and through which we have, through Christ's sacrifice, become acceptable to God as God's own. In the spirit of Paul, Barth insists that thus, we are no longer our own, but God's; there is no merit in our past life or deeds, because God has taken over our life, and "now God is for me."⁸¹ That means that as Christians we live solely by God's forgiveness. That is "the only thing by which we live, the power of all powers!"⁸²

⁸⁰ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Harper & Row, Torchbooks, 1959), 139.

⁸¹ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 152.

⁸² Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 152.

Therefore, and for this reason alone, “we are in a true sense *responsible* [emphasis in original] . . .”⁸³ and by this we will be judged:

About this the Judge will one day put the question, Did you live by grace, or did you set up gods for yourself and perhaps want to become one yourself? Have you been a faithful servant, who has nothing to boast of? In that case you are accepted; for then you have surely been merciful as well as have forgiven your debtors; then you have surely also comforted others and been a light, then your works have surely been good works, works which flow from forgiveness of sins.⁸⁴

Even forgiveness is the grace of God. As through God’s grace we are freely given the power and will to be forgiven and thereby forgive others, we are therefore responsible for forgiving. Paradoxically, with more freedom to forgive, we are more responsible to forgive as Christians within our communities!

Many parishioners that I have counseled walked through the process of forgiveness unwillingly at first; yet, after they had experienced God’s transformational love and forgiveness, they were more able to forgive others. This process of forgiveness will be explained in my next story about Emīlija.

Emīlija’s Grief Process: Forgiveness

Emīlija, one of my parishioners who always attended our Bible studies, listened attentively when we discussed the Lord’s Prayer and raised the question about forgiveness. Most of my parishioners wholeheartedly believed in the petition “and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” As good Christians they understood that we must forgive as God has forgiven us. However, some parishioners had

⁸³ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 152.

⁸⁴ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 152.

difficulties to comprehend the need for forgiving those persons who hurt us, mugged us, raped us, or killed our loved ones. Certainly not those Soviets! We decided to continue this topic at our next session. After the Bible study, Emīlija said she would like to talk with me about this question of forgiveness. Could I visit her?

When I visited her at the senior citizens' center, Emīlija told me about her war experiences and life. Her husband had been drafted into the German Army and sent to the Russian front. He was killed in battle on the day after Christmas, in 1943. She was left alone with her three small children--Dagnija, aged seven, Juris, aged four, and little Pēteris, just a little more than two years old. At first, Emīlija was in denial: "Perhaps they made a mistake, perhaps he will come home--if not now, after the war. . . ." Even after she received a letter from one of her husband's army buddies, telling of his death, she had difficulties to accept the news as reality. However, as time passed and she did no longer receive any letters from her husband, the reality set in that he would never come home. Then she was angry--at the Germans for having drafted him and at the Russians for having killed him.

The children kept her busy; she had to care for their survival. The Soviet front came closer. With other refugees, she had to leave her homeland. In the winter of 1944, they went by ship to Poland, then continued their journey in unheated cattle cars to Germany, passing through snow-covered countryside. Sitting on two suitcases, the children huddled around her, and she tried to keep them warm. While they were asleep, during the long night Emīlija grieved for her husband. He could have helped her! At least she was glad they were going westward. Some people froze to death in the cold weather.

Whenever they stopped on the way, German relief workers gave them some hot soup. In Dresden, they had to get out and wait for another train. Other refugees also waited patiently on the platform all night. Toward morning, when the train pulled into the station, suddenly the crowd rushed forward and almost pushed her children under the wheels. It was everybody for himself! Emīlija held onto her children for dear life and finally made it into one of the railroad cars. She held onto all three of them very tightly. They had to stand on their feet all the way to Plauen, Saxony.

Emīlija was glad to find a room in a village outside Plauen. There they lived until the end of the war. In Germany, the food was rationed; her family could buy only a little meat, 2 liters milk, some cereal, and a loaf of bread for the entire week. Every day, she gave each of them a slice of bread, keeping for herself the smallest. Emīlija told me, “When I saw that my children still had their big eyes on the rest of the loaf, I would tell them, ‘When the war is over, I will buy each of you a whole loaf of bread!’ ‘A whole loaf of bread?’ they asked with unbelief and glee. And their eyes got even bigger. Yes, those were hard times.” They prayed together and felt spiritually fed.

Emīlija said a silent prayer, asking for God’s help, when she went to the neighbor for permission to pick from his field some large green leaves, because the children needed vitamins for their teeth. She went to a farmer and traded in some of her valuables for a bag of grains; those she ground up in a meat grinder, added some water, and made porridge. The children praised the Lord for their delicious meal!

Emīlija knew that her children needed protein. Then she heard that in the neighboring town one could get meat for the same coupons for which she had already

bought bread. She acted quickly, scribbled over the crossed-out coupons, and rushed to the other town. She was lucky: the clerk accepted her lies that her children had done the scribbling, and she brought home some meat! Having been reared in a God-fearing, pious family, Emīlija knew that she had done wrong by lying, and she felt a little guilty, but she also knew that for her children she would do it again. Emīlija felt God would understand and forgive her.

A few days later, she went to the farmers again, looking for food. As Emīlija walked along the road, she heard the noise of shooting and saw some low-flying airplanes coming her way. Instinctively, she jumped into the ditch until the Soviet planes had passed by. Apparently, no ground fire had stopped their intrusion. Then she continued on her way. When she had gone over a hill, she saw how the low-flying planes had riddled a bus with bullets and killed the driver and all passengers. The bus was still burning. It was a terrible sight! "Why did God allow the war, hunger, loss of my husband? Why did I have to lie to get some food? How is all this going to end?" I listened and realized that when this had happened, Emīlija was in the bargaining stage of her grief story. Despite these moments of anguish and despair, Emīlija had the inner strength of faith. When times were tough, she kept going, knowing that God was always with her. She had to be both father and mother to her children!

The Soviet front came closer every day. What a relief it was when the American Army captured her village before the Soviets could take it. A few days later, the war was over. Emīlija and her children made their way to a refugee center in Jena, Thuringia. At last they were reunited with other Latvian refugees. Everyone wondered how long they

would have to wait till the Soviets would pull out their troops from their occupied lands, including Latvia. Then the bad news came: Not only will the Soviets keep the occupied countries of Eastern Europe, including the Baltic states, but they will also occupy Saxony and Thuringia! Rumors circulated that all refugees remaining in the Russian Zone will be deported to their native countries, perhaps even to Siberia. The people were either panicky or depressed. Where could they find safety? After many meetings with U.S. officials, the refugees were sent by train to ethnic refugee camps in Bavaria, in the American Zone.

The Latvian refugees were sent by train to a displaced persons camp near Nuremberg. Emīlija and her children were thankful to have a room in the barracks. The refugee camp had a common kitchen, hospital facilities, and a church. In September schools were to open in camp. Emīlija rejoiced that finally her children could have enough food, safety, and peace.

Sunday morning, the faith community gathered in church for a service of thanksgiving. Emīlija and her children went to the service. As usual at Holy Communion, each communion table received a special blessing from the pastor. When Emīlija had received Holy Communion, the pastor pronounced the following verse from Isaiah 54:10:

Kalni atkāpsies
un pakalni šaubīsies,
bet Mana žēlastība
no tevis neatkāpsies
un Mana miera derība
nešaubīsies,
saka tas Kungs,
tavs Apzēlotājs.

For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not
depart from you,
and my covenant of peace
shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has
compassion on you.

Tears of gratitude streamed down her face. The Lord had truly kept his peace covenant and will keep it forever! Emīlija felt truly blessed. “This is my favorite Bible verse,” she told me. She felt that the pastor pronounced this verse especially for her. At that moment she felt totally forgiven, and she in turn, totally forgave everyone--for all her sufferings, even for the death of her husband. “Yes, the Lord does well, whatever He does!” Emīlija said with conviction and new understanding.

By God’s help, the Church World Service sponsored Emīlija and her children to the U.S. She worked hard. On Sundays, they took a subway to center city of Philadelphia, then a streetcar to the Latvian Lutheran church many blocks away. Her children studied and received academic degrees, excelled in their fields, married, and had children of their own. When the last one of them married and took over the responsibility for the family home, Emīlija moved into her own apartment, “to have my own life,” she told me.

Emīlija told me that these were the best days of her life. She could live without a care. Emīlija proudly showed me her plants in a sunny window. She told me that she ate her dinners in the community dining hall downstairs and enjoyed helping some elderly disabled residents at tables. She loved her visits with her children and in-laws, enjoyed the grandchildren, and praised the Lord for providing for all her needs.

After our long talk, she finally asked me whether she should share her story of loss and grief at the next Bible study. Emīlija also wanted to tell that she felt God’s complete forgiveness, which made her glad to forgive others, in turn. She hoped to encourage other members to do the same. I wholeheartedly agreed with her, and I was grateful to Emīlija for having shared her story with me.

In conclusion, the grief story of Emīlija, and those of some Latvian immigrant parishioners in this project, reinforces the fact that within the community of faith the storytelling must be theologized for healing and wholeness. In the congregation, as well as any other faith community including private visits, through story telling and story listening we can truly experience God's grace, love, healing, and forgiveness; and we can also forgive others.

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